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"I Don't Even Talk About It": Applying Ray's Theory of Racialized Organizations to Class Stratification in Academia

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we develop a working theory examining how the organizational apparatuses of colleges and universities, as well as larger trends in higher education, contribute to unequal outcomes for faculty from working-class backgrounds and their upper- and middle-class counterparts. Based on 30 interviews with a nationwide sample of academic faculty and graduate students in sociology, we adapt an analytical approach introduced by Victor Ray, a theory of racialized organizations, to identify several common mechanisms in higher education that hinder working-class faculty members' ability to form professional relationships and gain prestige at post-secondary institutions, disrupt efforts to diversify faculty bodies socioeconomically, and preserve class-based inequalities by masking the saliency of social class in faculty settings. Adapting Ray's analysis, we divide these organizational features of higher education into three categories—superstructure (collective ideologies), structure (policies and norms), and substructure (individual schemas)—illustrating how these features uphold and reinforce one another.

KEYWORDS

Faculty; professors; sociology of sociology; working class

A growing body of research shows that college faculties are largely populated by workers who come from middle- and upper-socioeconomic backgrounds (Haney 2015; Morgan et al. 2022; Roscigno et al. 2022, 2023; Wapman et al. 2022). Only 7.4 percent of American adults hold a master's degree or higher, yet over half of faculty report having a parent who holds a master's degree or higher (Morgan et al. 2022). In this respect, academia as an employment field is much like other white-collar occupations, where entry often relies upon substantial economic, cultural, and social capital and is accessed via individual and institutional gatekeepers (Friedman and Laurison 2019; Rivera 2012).

This context is important for understanding the experiences of working-class faculty members. Research shows that social class is highly salient in shaping working-class faculty members' identities (Grimes and Morris 1997), training and employment pathways (Haney 2015; Roscigno et al. 2023), and professional relationships and senses of belonging (Lee 2017). This has implications not only for faculty members but also for students. The significance of representative teaching and academic leadership, or lack thereof, in promoting self-efficacy among historically marginalized students has become widely documented (Gershenson, Hansen, and Lindsay 2021; Mason 2009; Reay 2004). Diverse faculty bodies also prevent majority perspectives from becoming hegemonic in academic discourse (Antonio 2002; Johnson 2011).

Despite these clear and patterned indicators of the significance of faculty class background in professional academic employment, the conversation around diversity in faculty ranks typically does not include social class (Lee 2017), leaving working-class status as a rather underexamined identity or status marker in professional academia. Indeed, some research suggests that faculty members from

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middle- and upper-class backgrounds (i.e., in the majority in class terms) believe that class background is no longer salient by the time one has completed one's education (Haney 2015).

This incongruity between importance and lack of acknowledgment is exacerbated by the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework that establishes the systemic, structural nature of class exclusion in higher education as a professional workplace. A theoretical framework is essential for understanding how classism permeates through organizational features, such as policy. Scholars of race and higher education have examined parallel questions concerning the structural components that contribute to racial disparities (Evans and Moore 2015; Moore 2020; Rodriguez, Deane, and Davis 2022; Wingfield and Alston 2014). Here, we draw on Ray's (2019) analyses of organizations as racial structures by categorizing and connecting what he defines as a superstructure (justification of inequality), structure (formal and informal rules that allocate material and social capital), and substructure (the implicit schemas of majorities).

We use in-depth interview data gathered from a nationwide sample of faculty members and graduate students in sociology from working-class and first-generation college backgrounds to identify what policies, structures, and norms directly and disproportionately disadvantage working-class academics. We analyze them through the lens of Ray's theoretical framework to establish how these policies and norms reinforce and legitimize each other. Our adaptation of this model allows us to envision not only where classism exists structurally in higher education but also why classist policies and norms go unaddressed. We introduce new findings on policies and norms that contribute to class inequality and provide new insight into how previously identified, inequality-producing policies and norms reinforce and legitimize each other. Further, we evaluate how policy can shape the relationship between a faculty's class of origin and their professional experiences to equip institutions with practical solutions to promote class inclusivity within their faculty ranks.

BACKGROUND

Social Class as a Durable Identity Marker

Social class is "a stratification system that ranks people by their differential access to material, social, and cultural resources" (Durante and Fiske 2017:43). It can be distinguished from socioeconomic status, which exclusively describes *economic stratification* using measures such as income, employment, or education level (Gray and Kish-Gephart 2013; Sayer 2005). Both pertain to one's access to power and resources, but social class pays particular attention to cultural and interaction-based resources. Even if an individual achieves a higher socioeconomic status, these resources impact one's access to monetary and social resources. This definition allows us to evaluate the identity of an academic from a working-class background: While academics from working-class backgrounds may have transitioned into a higher socioeconomic status, many retain identification with and profound connections to working-class communities, as well as practices, beliefs, and dispositions shaped by working-class life (Dews and Leste 1995; Grimes and Morris 1997).

Studying social class as a source of power influenced by but able to be disconnected from one's relationship to material resources is a foundational component of sociological theory. Bourdieu (1986) formally outlined the notion of cultural capital to the sociological canon, the symbolic or behavioral aspects of one's class identity, often adopted at an early age. In the context of the sociology of education, Lareau and Weininge (2003:597) argued that one's cultural capital is intertwined with one's ability to "comply with institutionalized standards of evaluation" and therefore is inherently linked to one's ability to navigate educational contexts, emphasizing the interlinked reproductive durability of cultural capital and social class across generations. Since then, scholars have continued to investigate how social class emerges through behavior, particularly how interactions reinforce an image of competence among upper-class individuals (Durante and Fiske 2017). The adoption of cultural norms adhering to one's class status is an early form of socialization: Independent of monetary resources, Streib (2011) found class replication in preschool classrooms, as students from upper-

middle-class backgrounds were more likely to argue and ask for their needs to be met. Understanding the role of social class in socialization and early norm adoption allows us to show the saliency of a working-class background as an inseparable aspect of the upbringing of a "working-class academic," even if they were later immersed into a high-SES lifestyle. Therefore, a scholarly lens rooted in cultural capital and the social implications of a social class of origin orients any theoretical framework discussing how higher education interacts with working-class faculty.

Social Class Disparities in the Academic Pipeline

Faculty from working-class backgrounds are not only underrepresented in academia, but a study focusing on sociologists found they are further underrepresented in top-20 departments compared to the average among all sociology departments (Roscigno et al. 2022). Elite schools have an even higher concentration of faculty and graduate students with significant academic cultural capital from their upbringing: Faculty at elite institutions (or the top 20 percent of departments in their field according to standard ranking systems) are 57.4 percent more likely to have a PhD-holding parent than faculty at non-elite institutions (Morgan et al. 2022). However, it is still important to note that working-class professors are significantly underrepresented at all types of institutions. Morgan et al. (2022) found that professors were more likely to report a parent holding a PhD than both parents holding a high school diploma or less, despite PhD holders making up less than one percent of the overall U.S. population. In short, issues of class stratification are not limited to well-resourced institutions or those considered elite.

Further, faculty from working-class backgrounds are already hindered by the implications of a pipeline to graduate school that rewards prestigious institutional affiliation: Admission rates into elite graduate programs are significantly correlated with the prestige of one's undergraduate school, but children of parents at the bottom 20 percent of the income distribution are 77 times less likely to attend an Ivy League school as an undergraduate student than children of parents in the top 1 percent (Chetty et al. 2017). This is important because the prestige of one's graduate school institution is an exceptional predictor of one's employment outcome in higher education: From 2011 to 2020, 80 percent of tenure-track faculty members were trained at just 20 percent of the PhD-granting institutions in the United States (Wapman et al. 2022). Given the importance of representation in teaching for working-class students, this mismatch further contributes to class-based replication within faculty bodies. Overall, class-based sorting into different campuses occurs along every step in the process of becoming a professor, from undergraduate enrollment to securing a tenure-track position. This sorting process hinders the professional success of aspiring academics from working-class backgrounds.

Working-Class Faculty Experiences

Faculty from working- or lower-class backgrounds report lower levels of well-being than their upper- and middle-class counterparts (Dougall, Weick, and Vasiljevic 2021). Research in this area finds that working-class faculty feel excluded and inadequately advised, as well as that their concerns are invisible (Lee 2017; Pifer et al. 2022; Waterfield, Beagan, and Mohamed 2019). Further, the experience of faculty from working-class backgrounds is often defined by liminality, as "the experience of being betwixt and between social roles and/or identities" (Ibarra and Obodaru 2016:47, as cited in Pifer et al. 2022:109). This liminal experience has led working-class academics to express "feelings of distrust and naiveté" (Pifer et al. 2022:112) about structures in academia, such as the tenure process. These stressors are additionally amplified by the extra workload needed to compensate for a lack of cultural capital derived from school and home environments compared to middle-class peers (Haney 2015). Moreover, despite navigating unfamiliar spaces, in the case of graduate students, working-class academics are less likely to go to their peers for advice, at times due to a lack of integration into the department (Warnock and Sara Appel 2011).

As in the case of working-class faculty underrepresentation, core pillars of the working-class faculty experience transcend career position (Ardoin and martinez 2019). For example, Ardoin and martinez (2019) presented a holistic set of stories from working-class academics, from students to administrators. They found that even senior administrators from working-class backgrounds continue to fight through imposter syndrome while navigating predominantly elite spaces. On the other end of the pipeline, Soria (2015) highlighted the social and academic integration of working-class students as critical issues that shape class-based outcomes in higher education early on.

Overall, previous literature has described an experience for academics from working-class backgrounds that is unique and often comes with significant burdens and disadvantages. However, there are areas where additional research could assist in formulating how these findings are symptomatic of organizational features of individual campuses and higher education as an employment field. This paper assesses to what extent and in what ways the origins of these disadvantages, among others, derive from policy and organizational structure.

The Superstructure, Structure, and Substructure of Higher Education Organizations

Ray's (2019) analyses of superstructure, structure, and substructure are useful in parsing and analyzing the interrelated, multilevel, and longitudinal nature of barriers. Ray's overarching argument is that individual organizations may be shaped by macrolevel structures (most notably, institutional racism) but still hold agency over their own distribution of resources and influence over affairs that exist beyond the control of the organization. In Ray's theorization, the racialized allocation of resources within an organization is both justified by and, in turn, reinforces a larger-scale racialized ideology and prejudices within individual interactions. We apply and translate this model to the specific context of class-stratified resources operating in higher education. Adapting Ray's (2019) analysis, we define the superstructure, structure, and substructure of a class-based institution and how they interact and uphold one another with similar criteria.

For example, Ray's (2019) theory highlights how racial segregation has become schematized as an expectation in American society, even after the abolition of de jure segregation, because of its long, grueling history. In the example of K-12 education, following *Brown v. Board of Education*, this schema has been expressed using organizational policies such as internal tracking that racially segregates students into different classes and societal norms, such as white enrollment in private schools (Ray 2019). In the context of social class and higher education, we identified a schematic expectation surrounding social class in this space to deny social class as a structural factor. This is visible through how upper-middle-class faculty explain differences through inaccurate judgments of individual personalities and skills of working-class faculty. This schema is expressed through several norms in academia that fail to consider cultural capital differences.

While substructure and structure translated cohesively, the superstructure in Ray's analysis differs from our class-based analysis. Ray's theory focuses on the existence of a pernicious racial ideology that permeates through organizations in a superstructural capacity. While an explicit, anti-working-class ideology may exist in academia, most of our interviewees' experiences did not speak to this, and we, therefore did not identify support for this possibility in our analyses. However, we located another relevant superstructure in play.

METHODS

This study is based on 30 interviews conducted between 2020 and 2022. These interviews were drawn from a sample of 139 sociologists who self-identify as being from working-class, first-generation, or low-income backgrounds. For the purposes of this study, a subsample of interviews was selected to meet the following criteria: respondents who received graduate training in and

Table 1. Demographic Information ($N = 30$).

Race/Ethnicity	*n*	Gender	*n*	Rank*	*n*	Institution Type*	*n*
White	21	Woman	18	Full Professor	8	Public Four-Year	18
Latino/a/x	5	Man	10	Graduate Student	7	Private Liberal Arts	6
Black	2	Nonbinary	2	Associate Professor	7	Private	6
Native American	1			Assistant Professor	6		
Biracial	1			Adjunct Professor	1		
				Postdoctoral Fellow	1		

*at time of interview.

currently work in the United States; respondents who currently worked in academic settings or were graduate students; respondents who indicated that they were a first-generation college graduate; and respondents who indicated (i.e. self-reported) that they came from either a working-class or low-income background All respondents identified as fitting multiple of these identity categories—e.g. first-generation and working-class. There is no single definition for these identity terms, and we focus on respondents' understandings of themselves in our analyses. For the sake of concision and to focus attention on the class dynamics in play, we collectively refer to respondents as working class. This subsample established that participants experienced both the financial and cultural capital differences from their majority upper- and middle-class counterparts and ensured that participants were equipped to reflect on both past and present experiences in academia.

All interviews were conducted by three of this paper's coauthors, Hurst, Lee, and Muñoz, and by a team of doctoral students supervised by Hurst. Interviews were therefore conducted by a team of scholars whose class background varied and who were diverse as to gender, race, and nationality. Of the authors, Hurst and Muñoz are from working-class, first-generation backgrounds, whereas Rowe-Nicholls and Lee are not. An important part of interview preparation, however, was a targeted discussion of the impact and meaning of class background and how this intersects with other crucial social identities. The duration of interviews ranged from 40 minutes to two hours but averaged approximately one hour. All interviews were one-on-one meetings conducted via web-conferencing software or telephone.

Each interview used a structured, open-ended interview guide so that each respondent was asked the same core framework of questions while allowing for follow-up on particularities specific to each respondent. Interviews focused on the respondent's decisions to attend college and graduate school, the process of attaining sociological training and mentorship, experiences in their career to date, and feelings about their class background and current experiences of class in their professional lives. Interviews were transcribed using an online service and then corrected to ensure accuracy. All quotes are verbatim, and pseudonyms were either selected by the respondent or assigned by the coder. Demographic information is found in Table 1.

Our initial coding process began with open coding of 13 interviews from this sample. From these, we created over 50 codes pertaining to participants' professional and personal relationships, attitudes toward their social class, and experiences with all aspects of faculty life. We then developed a focused coding scheme, utilizing 10 codes to closely examine participants' narratives about the progression of their careers, their attitudes toward other academics and academia as a whole, and how they noticed or discussed, or did not notice or discuss, class differences in academia. The coding process was completed by the lead author, Rowe-Nicholls, who did not participate in interview collection. The subsequent 17 interviews were analyzed with these focused codes. During this stage, we also looked for disconfirming evidence. Finally, we applied an adaptation of Ray's model, composed of a superstructure, structure, and substructure, to support our structurally focused analytical strategy; analyses were led by the first author. This allowed us to demonstrate the interconnected nature between the policies and norms that create class disparities and the phenomena that explain how class disparities remain hidden and unaddressed.

RESULTS

We used interview data to note common barriers perceived by working-class background sociologists. We then sorted these perceived barriers into Ray's superstructure, structure, and substructure categories to show the ways that utilizing a theoretical model brings multiple, interrelated types of barriers into relation with one another. We outline each briefly below.

The structure is made up of *policies and norms* that contribute to the unequal distribution of social and material capital along class-based lines that other scholars have previously documented. The key to conceptualizing the effect of the structure is that it negatively affects working-class faculty *disproportionately* because of the policy or norm's juxtaposition with a particular feature of the working-class identity in academia, as identified by interviewees. Because of the superstructure and substructure, which conceal the saliency of a social class of origin, these policies and norms are not frequently addressed or acknowledged as inequality-reproducing systems. These data identify three examples of norms in higher education that contribute to class inequities among faculty bodies: (1) the failure of many graduate programs to provide proper financial aid and professional development advising; (2) the concept of prestige, its connection to institutional affiliation, and how methods of measuring one's prestige are not attuned to professional strengths and familiar areas for working-class faculty; and (3) the implications for working-class faculty members' goals of career stability, juxtaposed with the ongoing reduction of tenure track positions in American higher education. It is also important to note that the list of norms in the structure of higher education is not intended to be exhaustive. Rather, it is a set of examples derived from the data. This theoretical framework operates under two key assumptions: (1) Other sets of data could identify further barriers to working-class faculty in higher education; and (2) Individual institutions, as well as interinstitutional organizations, can and should also enact policies that alleviate the burdens imposed by preexisting norms.

The superstructure is a set of *collective* ideologies that deny class as a structural factor, focusing on individual rather than systemic explanations for outcomes. The findings from this research reveal that the superstructure produces a gap between working-class academics' desires to raise awareness of barriers in academia created by class-based policies and norms and the extent to which they feel comfortable actually discussing the implications of social class. This serves as a justifying agent because it keeps issues that affect working-class inclusion invisible among the majority of academics and administrators who are from upper-middle-class backgrounds.

Finally, the substructure is comprised of *individual schemas* that ignore class inequality as systemic and focus on individual differences. They arise as implicit interpretations of the behavior of working-class faculty, or assumptions that upper-middle-class faculty make about working-class faculty, or working-class faculty perceive others making about them. These assumptions and behaviors alienate working-class faculty from their upper-middle-class counterparts and undermine their perceived self-efficacy in the eyes of their counterparts. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the summation of these findings.

Identifying the Structure

The Hidden Curriculum of Professional Development and Funding. The first structural component that contributes to working-class barriers in academia is what two participants, Erin (grad student, public) and Adrian (grad student, public), described as the "hidden curriculum" of graduate education. The hidden curriculum encompasses a set of professional development skills that graduate students are expected to master without formal instruction or adequate guidance. More than half of the participants reported that their graduate school curriculums did not adequately prepare students with skills such as how to publish, find a job, and find a mentor. Some participants reported that this was a significant downside of their graduate school experience and cited their social class of origin as a reason why the "hidden curriculum" was exceptionally difficult to navigate. As Maeve (full prof, public) summarized:

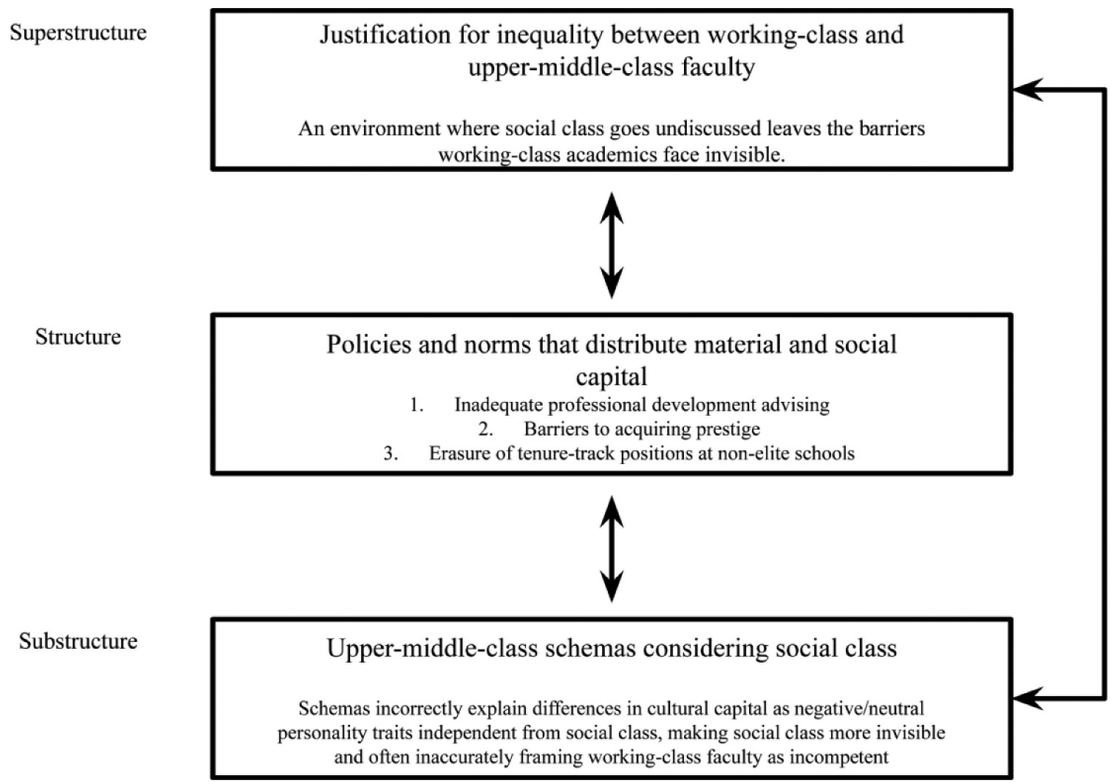


Figure 1. Visualizing the superstructure, structure, and substructure.

> It would have helped if there was some kind of proseminar that said, "These are the stages," "this is that," "graduate school is about relationships, not courses," you know, there's, "you're going to take a QE" . . . . There was so much assumption that somebody should have told me. Was I so effective at class passing that they had no idea? You know, or did they not care, or did they feel that I had somehow been there by mistake? I don't know. It would have been so easy to . . . just like, tell us how things work.

On a similar note, Sebastian (grad student, private) highlights that the "hidden curriculum" also attends to interactional components of the graduate school experience. When asked to provide advice to incoming first-generation graduate students, he said,

> You know, it feels obvious like when I say it, but . . . it's not the official requirements that are going to be an issue, it's all the informal stuff you don't know about that are . . . it's really easy to miss, right? What are the sort of background expectations on like when you're going to get things done . . . when is it reasonable to engage with a professor . . . stuff like that.

Another aspect of the hidden curriculum of professional development in academia is literacy on academic funding. Others reported that not knowing how to discuss the details of financial aid or ask the right questions about their financial plan made their graduate school experience significantly more difficult. Sven (associate prof, private) recalled how inadequate knowledge of how graduate school fellowship packages worked led him to unexpected student loans:

> I certainly didn't have the tools to ask, you know what I mean? I didn't ask them, you know . . . What [does] the support look like for year two, three, four, and five? I just assumed . . . that the financial package in year one would be there the whole time. Yeah, and it was not. So right. So this is why, you know, by I think my second or third year there I was taking student loans again . . . because I couldn't afford to be there otherwise.

Other interviewees spoke more generally about the barriers to accessing the hidden curriculum. Ellen (full prof, public), who entered academia later in life, felt that being upper class would make her far more likely to uncover the mysteries of the hidden curriculum: She said with an upper-class background, she would,

> be less hesitant, ask for more things, instead of just assuming like "why can't they see I'm so great"—You know, maybe ingratiate myself a little more, little more handshaking, a little more—you know, "I'd like to be part of your research team," instead of just saying, "why don't they choose me?"

Ellen's sentiment that her working-class background made her more hesitant to communicate needs to authority figures is in line with prior research on the effects of a working-class background on undergraduate students: Jack (2016) noted how undergraduate students from low-income backgrounds from distressed high schools typically "withdrew" from interacting with authority figures.

By analyzing graduate school curriculums as structures in higher education policy that leave professional development hidden, we can recognize professional development and financial aid as areas where working-class graduate students are at a disadvantage. Moreover, they might have a greater need for financial aid and resume-building opportunities due to their prior economic and educational opportunities informed by their social class. While there is no data set on the underemployment rate of first-generation college faculty specifically, we can infer that these hidden curriculums lead continuing-generation and upper-middle-class college students to appear more appealing in hiring processes. This thereby limits working-class faculty members' access to jobs, perpetuating the homogeneity of people with upper-middle-class cultural capital in higher education.

Barriers to Acquiring Prestige. The majority of participants believed that, speaking generally, academic sociologists care deeply about the concept of prestige. The data reveal several different factors that influence a faculty member's level of prestige. Respondents most frequently cited institutional affiliation, or how prestigious one's institution is considered, as the greatest contributing factor to a faculty member's own prestige. Respondents observed that institutional prestige was salient in many professional interactions: Multiple participants had encounters with institutional snobbery when someone at a conference began to come up to speak to them, read the name of their non-elite institution on their nametag, and as Charles (assistant prof, private) said, "turned around to talk to somebody else from a more prestigious college." Caitlyn (adjunct prof, public), who expressed significant sadness because of her lack of stable job prospects, felt that her caliber of prestige was not only directly linked to her social class background but contributed to her minimal job prospects:

> I don't have like a fancy enough advisor or something, you know, and that's all like cumulative . . . where I came from, through my educational path . . . which obviously is linked to social class. So I just, yeah, like I feel passed over a lot because I'm not fancy enough, right?

By perpetuating a culture that rewards affiliation with elite institutions, when low-SES students do not have equitable access to those institutions (Morgan et al. 2022; Wapman et al. 2022), faculty from working-class backgrounds struggle to build prestige—an issue that, according to the participants in this study, creates barriers in the realms of applying for jobs and networking. This is important to understanding how a class-based structure can perpetuate the underrepresentation of working-class faculty in academia, particularly in top departments.

In addition, the achievements of a professor's career that garner prestige and are rewarded at research institutions do not align with the professional strengths identified by respondents as stemming from a working-class background. One-third of participants reported having an advantage in teaching, citing relatability and ability to disarm students that they saw as arising from their backgrounds. These faculty reported that students are more likely to come to them about struggles outside of the classroom that impact their work, or that their experiences can open conversations and engage students in their classroom. These strengths may be more valued at a small liberal arts college than at an R1 institution. As an example of this, Julia (associate prof, private) "adopts a more common vernacular" when discussing "esoteric" topics to "meet students more where they are and be more relatable." She says that code-switching "lets . . . [her] class background show:" "I do code switch to a vernacular that I wouldn't know unless . . . I had been, you know." Ellen (full prof, public) also provided an example of this:

> So I do get a lot of first-generation college students, you know, 18 years old, so. I think they can relate to me a little better . . . I think I'm just a little more "real" maybe than some people. But I mean I'm always kind of—I don't know how much of that is from my background or just my personality.

However, teaching is not rewarded in the same respect as research in the R1 systems that participants dubbed as prestigious, such as within the tenure process (Trower 2012; Ward 2003; reviewed in O'Meara et al. 2017). Instead, the most prominent method of gaining prestige in these systems, and increasingly at all institutional systems, is through publishing research. While this data does not suggest that research is a weakness for working-class faculty, it does expand on the finding from Miner (2021) that research and publishing are not something that the families of first-generation graduate students often comprehend and respect the importance of. If publishing research is the most salient avenue to gaining prestige, and teaching is not a typical avenue, then working-class academics must focus on the aspect of their career most alien to their families in order to become prestigious.

Over half of participants from all ranks in academia reported some facet of their relationship with family that identified with this theme. One common report was that the scholarship aspect of academic life, and the complicated workload that comes from scholarship, was most alien to working-class families of origin. Aspects of academic life, from summer terms to light teaching loads, were often scrutinized by family members due to their lack of understanding of scholarship as a part of a professor's workload. One participant who is particularly research-focused, Raymond (associate prof, public), recalled how his family often reacts to his light teaching load:

> I don't teach very often because I'm very research active. And so they just like laugh when they're like, "oh, what, you know, what are you teaching?" I'm like, "Oh, well, I'm not teaching till January." And then it's two and a half hours a week. They just can't understand, like, the other obligations that I have, you know what I mean? They are people who punch clocks.

Instead, teaching is often the most understood by family or seen indisputably as work. Matt (assistant prof, private) even felt relief when he got a teaching position because he could easily explain his job now: "With my family, they never really knew what I was doing and how to explain it to people. So, it was a big relief when I started teaching because I told them, [you] just have to go, 'teacher.'" Another participant, Charlotte (associate prof, private), summarized the impact of her family's lack of understanding: "But, like I said, my parents, there was never malicious intent, but it would have helped if they understood what I was doing. It would have helped if my family, all my family understood what I was doing." Because of the way promotion mechanisms are calibrated at prestigious institutions, workers at such institutions must focus their efforts on the forms of academic work that are most alien to their families.

The Reduction of Tenure-track Positions and Working-class Faculty's Desire for Stability. When asked about what participants value in terms of the material and practical benefits of academic life, the most common response included valuing the stability that a tenure-track position provides, or that they saw achieving tenure as their greatest career accomplishment. Several participants' parents experienced job insecurity over their childhood. For example, Caitlyn (adjunct prof, public) directly cited this instability as the reason why she has such a desire to obtain a tenured position:

> I saw my parents over the years. Getting laid off many different times from different jobs. Like they had no control over it, even though they were great workers and good workers. And I just saw like, oh, professors, you get tenure and you have a job for life. I want that stability.

Rose (grad student, private) made a similar report about the importance of job benefits: "As a first-generation student in college, I had one goal, which [was] get a job that gives you the health insurance . . . You know, and so, like, that was a big thing right . . . you just wanted to have financial stability." Alexa (assistant prof, private) delineated an important distinction between wanting financial stability and wanting money, revealing that she only wanted the latter due to her low-income background:

> I'm clearly not motivated by money . . . I think I have the advantage of when you come out of poverty and like you know, like life is pretty good right? . . . In terms of my family, we are high savers, or you know, we're very frugal . . . . But that's kind of, in the, in the dream right to have our savings and everything . . . . I would say it would have to have some financial security.

A working-class individual may want to pursue academia for many reasons, but a common, core motivational factor is the stability it can provide. This motivation is often rooted in the implications of one's own working-class identity.

These desires for stability are unfolding within an institutional context of fewer and fewer tenure-track lines than ever before. While tenure-track lines are the golden ticket to security and benefits in higher education, Tiede (2022) revealed that 53.5 percent of four-year institutions had replaced some tenure-track lines with adjunct positions between 2014 and 2019; an increase from just 17.2 percent between 1999 and 2004. Already, we see various sources illustrate how many working-class scholars end up in contingent pools (Dubeau and Mehta-Neugebauer 2020; Ortega 2020; Staff 2015; Van Wyck 2017). Participants in this study reported financial instability in their time after graduate school while seeking full-time employment, or sometimes even after reaching full-time employment. This was often exacerbated by surmounting student debt and personal loans, or responsibilities to support children or parents. We do not know of any data on the rate at which highly prestigious institutions are losing tenure-track positions compared to non-elite institutions; however, we can hypothesize that rising endowment inequality between elite and non-elite institutions (Nietzel 2021) may force non-elite institutions to cut tenure-track positions at a greater rate to lower operating costs. If this is true, since it is disproportionately difficult for working-class faculty to enter highly prestigious research institutions (due to our previous connection between prestige and hiring), and the vast majority of faculty work at institutions at or below the prestige ranking of their doctoral program (Wapman et al. 2022), this would mean that the tenure-track positions most accessible to and in line with the strengths of working-class faculty are shrinking disproportionately. If the number of tenure-track positions continues to shrink, one could expect prospective working-class applicants to be particularly disadvantaged, and the professoriate would become more disproportionately upper- and upper-middle class. The diminishing opportunities for stability that draw working-class people into careers in academia will make it more difficult to entice working-class people to become academics, thereby making it even more difficult to diversify higher education institutions.

Identifying the Superstructure

The superstructure refers to collective ideologies. In our data, respondents described a collective ideology that minimizes or denies the role of class as a structural factor relevant to professional academic life (see Haney 2015). Most respondents reported that their class background has been salient in forming their experience through the academic pipeline, generating a variety of challenges along the way. However, these data elucidate a gap between the extent to which working-class faculty want to discuss the implications of social class and the extent to which those effects are discussed and addressed in academia. Respondents consistently noted that professional academia is an environment where social class and its implications remain undiscussed and unaddressed with regard to those who work in this setting. Participants in the sample reported a lack of opportunities for faculty to present their class struggles, an interconnected tendency to underreport the barriers they have faced due to their class, and a fear or discomfort with presenting their working-class identities. Almost half of the participants discussed an element of their experience that connected to this theme of underreporting class barriers.

Indeed, several noted that they were primarily motivated to participate in this study to address the invisibility of social class in academia. Cleo (full prof, private) summed up their rationale in line with other findings within the data, referring to their working-class background: "It's something that about me that I feel like is really invisible that I was trying to bring up. When I teach that like, that is an important part of who I am, where I come from, and I have a lot of pride in it too." Adrian (grad

student, public) remarked that based on his experiences with attending a university with little first-generation representation during his undergraduate years, he wanted to be interviewed to raise awareness for "what it's like to be first-gen and why we faced so many different barriers, that maybe other people don't even see." On a similar note, Charles (assistant prof, private) aimed to address the "assumed meritocracy in academia," connecting this notion to the invisible barriers that working-class and low-income faculty face and calling upon sociologists to be "self-reflexive" of marginalized professors. This echoes the experiences of working-class students attending selective colleges, who are much more aware of class differences than their middle- or upper-class peers (Stuber 2006), indicating that in majority-advantaged settings, those who are themselves advantaged can remain less aware of inequality or their own position relative to others.

Among the participants who indicated a connection to this theme, the majority reported instances in which their class identity was drowned out from discourse, or they otherwise felt a need to underreport the barriers they faced due to their class background. For an example of the former, Cleo reported that they were usually asked to discuss the impact of other identities rather than class, such as being a member of the LGBTQ+ community: "It's not my usual . . . like usually people were talking [to me] about being queer. Oh, this [referring to social class] is like just this whole part of my life that I feel like it's really, you know, important." This subsuming of class varied along racial, ethnic, and gender lines. For an example of underreporting, several white men in the data set reported that, while their social class created barriers for them, they often did not discuss social class because they themselves felt privileged in the aggregate due to their race and gender. Wilson (grad student, public), said,

> I don't know, like the first gen [identity] . . . I even feel guilty putting it in my application letter . . . when I compare my actual experiences to other folks, it feels a little disingenuous to play with that part of my identity.

Another faculty member, Matt (assistant prof, private), said bluntly: "Being a middle-aged white man in the U.S., is pretty—it's pretty, it's a pretty good gig, right?"

In line with this, participants across racial and gender backgrounds reported instances where they felt their social class was perceived as irrelevant: Recalling her sentiments after a classist comment made by a professor, Maeve (full prof, public), reflected, "I thought either, I am so good at class passing that she doesn't realize [there are] working-class people in this world . . . Or she doesn't care, that we're in this room." Raymond (associate prof, public) explained the implications that social class's invisibility has on its role in conversation around diversity and inclusion within academia:

> In sociology, the things that seem to matter are race and gender, because they're visible, and they're protected categories, for affirmative action. Nobody, you know, if you write that you're working class in your diversity statement, nobody gives a shit.

All these examples highlight how class is drowned out of discourse by others assuming academia is socioeconomically homogeneous, directly not asking about class compared to other identities, or that the magnitude of racism and sexism and the saliency of race and gender exceed classism and class identity, even if class identity holds its own significant disadvantages. Because of environmental factors in academia that make social class underrecognized, social class faces a limited role in the discussion of diversity and inclusion among faculty bodies.

However, participants also shared other reasons why they might not discuss their class background due to emotions of fear or embarrassment. Anne (full prof, public) felt that showing her working-class background would "undermine [her] stature" when she previously worked at an elite institution, particularly in her formative years as an academic: "But as a brand new faculty member woman in her 20s with my kind of background, at a place like [elite institution], it was far safer to not play that up." Anne believed that others would unfairly use this information about her identity to "assess how intelligent they think [she is]." Another participant, Caitlyn (adjunct prof, public) reported feeling too "embarrassed" to discuss the barriers she faced in academia that she believed her social class contributed to: "I think I've been very honest with you, because it's like, confidential and I want you

to understand the picture but yeah, I'm just, I'm very like, I don't even talk about it. Because I'm so embarrassed." While it was common among the participants not to be asked about social class, this instance goes a step further, indicating that social class or the barriers one faces because of it may want to be hidden by those who hold a working-class background in some instances. Danika (full prof, private) also reported a pivotal memory of her feelings when her first-generation status was visible:

> They pick a day and they give everybody on campus who was a first-generation college student a blue t-shirt that says "first generation" on it and we all wear them for one day. And you walk around campus and it's really eye-opening because you have no idea who's first generation. It's easy to disguise yourself. In fact, I, one year, I was nervous. What was so funny was when I first did this, I was nervous the first day. I put my shirt on, I was really proud of it, I got on campus and parked my car in the fancy faculty parking lot and got out of my car and just stopped and thought, I'm really self-conscious. I was almost tempted to put, like, a sweater on over it . . . . And I thought, [laughter] this is horrible. I feel awful.

While Danika reported that at the end of the day, her colleagues reacted positively to the shirt, her aversion to making her first-generation status clearly visible encapsulates how making class status clear can be uncomfortable for faculty who did not experience the normative, upper-middle-class upbringing.

Overall, class-based disparities in academia are perpetuated by a feature of the academic environment that *exists independently of* and *influences* the structural policies and norms in academia that directly encourage these inequalities. While Ray (2019) identifies the superstructure as a racist ideology within organizational environments, within the context of social class and academia, the superstructure appears to be a conscious or subconscious denial of the saliency of social class altogether. This collective ideology manifests itself within the professional academic environment as the gap between working-class faculty's desire to discuss class-based barriers and the extent to which they actually discuss it furthers social class's status as an invisible marker, which appears to be caused by several mechanisms. This feature of academia, as an environment where social class is both invisible and undiscussed, justifies or obscures the class-based inequalities other scholars have identified.

Identifying the Substructure

The classed substructure of professional academia manifests itself in how people in higher education schematically or implicitly organize information that pertains to social class differences within their own minds. Several participants highlighted minute differences they recognized between themselves and upper-middle-class faculty. The participants noted how these differences stem from their class background and cultural capital differences. However, they also expressed that other faculty, who do not come from working-class backgrounds, inaccurately acknowledge them as individual personality traits. This means that upper-middle-class faculty implicitly interpret or code the behavior of working-class faculty as something other than a result of their working-class roots, while working-class faculty can clearly articulate how their class background influences their behavior. These assumptions are important to note, as they keep the barriers that social class imposes invisible: Even though the working-class identity, in these instances, negatively affects a faculty member's perception by others or self-perception, the effects go unrecognized by upper-middle-class faculty because of their ability to be attributed to false or misleading individual traits by default, rather than a difference in cultural capital.

Half of the participants in this study provide examples of this, with many sharing multiple instances. Charles (assistant prof, private) discussed how he "can't manage to get dress shirts that don't come out of my pants when I stretch and write stuff on the board." He reported how others perceive him as "quirky" for this, when in reality, he just lacks experience with correctly sizing men's professional clothing because his father never wore suits: "But in reality, it's actually kind of based on the fact that like, I just didn't grow up in a world where that happened . . . so there are differences, but [they] just usually get coded differently." Another participant, Maeve (full prof, public), shared how performing working-class norms negatively impacted how other academics perceived her:

> I married my senior year, I mean like the year I finished, I changed my name or, you know, I did all these working-class things. So that, you know, first thing I published was under one name . . . next one in another. But it made people look down on me. Because I wouldn't just . . . I wasn't this free agent [doing] everything to advance my career and . . . I worked in a library right after getting my PhD, and a lot of people wrote me off.

In a similar vein, Amber (associate prof, public) reported how adherence to upper-middle-class norms was not only an expectation, but a requirement that needed "fixing" when it went unmet: "I didn't know how to talk with professional people, I didn't know what 'professional' attire was and I had few resources to 'fix' what faculty thought was wrong with me." Amber believed faculty saw her cultural capital difference as both needing to be "fixed" and something rooted in her own personal character. Essentially, working-class faculty reported that working-class behavior is misinterpreted and believed that upper-middle-class faculty perceived violations of these norms as negative or neutral and rooted in the individual.

Returning to Charles's anecdote, this use of the word "quirky" being interpreted as a personality trait offers a good demonstration of how a lack of class privilege differs from a lack of race or gender privilege: While white men may be associated with a neutral trait for this behavior, like "quirky," women and people of color may be more likely to be associated with a negative stereotype, like incompetent, by their peers (see Niemann et al. 2020). Indications of this phenomenon were also present in our dataset, such as with the previous quotes from Maeve and Amber. However, another participant, Rebecca (associate prof, public), a faculty member at an elite institution, revealed her sentiment that being underdressed for an interview may be perceived as unprofessional for a white individual because white applicants are often assumed to hold class privilege and therefore to possess elite cultural capital (Warnock 2019): "Or they overlook your class . . . If you are working-class white, like [you] don't get that benefit of the doubt." A lack of adherence to dress codes may stem from cultural capital or monetary differences brought on by a lack of class privilege, but Rebecca believed that this is not recognized in academia, and social class is "overlook[ed]." This demonstrates how race can become read as, and entangled with, perceived social class in academia, such that white individuals are presumed to be upper-middle class, whereas Black and Latino/a/x academics may not be. Complex intersections of race and class, particularly ways in which race and class intersect or are conflated and thereby penalize academics of color, have been fruitfully examined in other research (see e.g., Lee and Maynard 2019; Margolis and Romero 1998; Niemann et al. 2020; Reyes 2022).

Faculty also reported not only feeling misperceived but also fearing being misperceived. Charles feared coming across as arrogant due to class differences around talking about stress: "In the middle class, it's a big thing. People always want to talk about how stressed out they are, how they don't have any time like that, and while I am stressed out enough and don't have enough time, I don't like to talk about it. You know, like . . . [it] makes me anxious to bring it up . . . it comes off accidentally, a little arrogant sometimes." If upper-middle-class faculty had greater awareness of cultural differences rooted in social class, Charles would not have to worry about being perceived as "arrogant." As someone who came from a K-12 school with fewer resources, he also reported his struggles with grammar: "I had to self-teach myself grammar in graduate school so that I could write papers." This still may be inaccurately perceived as an intellectual deficit rather than a deficit of proper schooling on a subject reliant on a robust early childhood education. Another participant, Wilson (grad student, public), identified being seen as "not being committed" to his academic career path when he talked to others about his need to go home and take care of family members during the summer, a commitment necessary primarily due to his lack of class privilege. He mentioned this in response to a question about when his working-class identity has been salient during graduate school. These misconceptions could have negative consequences: Being seen as arrogant could make it more difficult for someone to connect with other faculty, and being seen as uncommitted could make it more difficult to earn promotions. It shows where the substructure operates: in implicit perceptions about working-class faculty, where cultural difference is incorrectly interpreted as the result of individual personality traits. Ray (2019):31) delineates substructural schemas as "a set of 'fundamental tools of thought' (Sewell 1992:7) for the accumulation and distribution of organizational resources." In our framework,

schemas offer inaccurate interpretations of who is, for example, "arrogant," "quirky," or "non-committed," which then could play a role in justifying the resource allocation prescribed by social and material capital allocating mechanisms, ranging from hiring and promotion to day-to-day office interactions.

Finally, the full implications of monetary scarcity can also be difficult for upper-middle-class faculty to fully comprehend. Multiple participants expressed concerns about the way they dress as setting them apart. Matt (assistant prof, private), for example, was told by a colleague that a secret to success in his department was to dress nicer than his superior, unaware that he could not afford such nice suits and shirts:

> I remember the professor . . . was like, giving me some advice . . . for [being] faculty like, you know, things like: How do you dress? So, she said you need to be dressed better than your chair. I was like, "I'm screwed" because he wears like Armani. I can't afford them.

Similarly, Amber recognized how those who had more money "to throw around" in graduate school seemed to have a distinct positive personality trait: "They all seemed a lot more confident." On another note, Caitlyn (adjunct prof, public) recalled an experience of dealing with a department chair who did not understand why she wanted to take a leave of absence if she was not taking the entire year off from working at all, or "live in a cabin in the woods or something and just, like, really find some time to get some peace," which was obviously unaffordable. This participant is not alone in taking time off from academia: First-generation students are more likely to have gaps in their academic career to take care of dependents or work full-time (Miner 2021). This instance reveals that more research is needed to evaluate to what extent working-class faculty's decisions brought on by monetary limitations are misunderstood by their upper-middle-class peers and colleagues. As Caitlyn later said,

> [I] need to make money. You know what I mean? Like, there is nobody to ask, like, if we can't pay our mortgage, like, I can't call my mom and be like, hey, can you help me out? . . . So it just looks like I make bad decisions, right? Like, I'm not looking out for myself. But that's just not the case. Right? This actually is me being as resourceful as I can.

This adds a specific example of how a lack of class awareness among faculty from upper-middle-class backgrounds contributes to favoritism toward other upper-middle-class academics: Their decisions are inaccurately viewed as wiser.

Overall, participants provided a wide array of examples of how the cultural and economic implications of social class and cultural capital create differences between working-class and upper-middle-class faculty. However, those implications are, can be, or are believed to be incorrectly interpreted as individual differences, where working-class faculty are viewed as having negative personality traits. Thus, the substructure is a mechanism rooted in individual interactions and perceptions that yields similar results to the more independently existing environmental force of the superstructure: Both components are caused by and contribute to the invisibility of social class.

DISCUSSION

This study identifies several features of higher education that contribute to barriers for working-class faculty and organizes them into three intermingling categories. To begin with the structure, this study has identified three key organizational features of postsecondary institutions that disadvantage academics from working-class and first-generation backgrounds. Working-class faculty are disproportionately affected by the lack of financial aid and professional development resources at academic institutions. This is a deficit on the part of institutions, where greater transparency on everything from departmental services and financial packages provided to graduate students and faculty to clear expectations of professional academics would begin to alleviate this problem. Of course, higher pay for graduate students and faculty alike would also effectively alleviate some of the burdens of a working-class, low-income background, as well. Second, the concept of prestige, defined by participants as related to one's

institutional affiliation and research honors, is both something significantly influential to one's ability to have a successful career and significantly influenced by factors relating to social class. The data show that scholarship is the professional task of a professor that is most alien to working-class families, while working-class academics often cite teaching as an area that they feel their class background gives them an advantage in. When put in the context that the tenure process at research institutions rewards scholarship significantly over teaching, this finding highlights that promotion mechanisms at certain institutions, particularly prestigious ones, reward working-class faculty members for striving in professional tasks that are most at odds with their class identity. This expands on Pifer et al. (2022) finding that the identity of a working-class academic is a liminal identity; rather, this identity may be better described as a juxtaposed identity in some instances, where what academia rewards is inconsistent with the strengths that working-class faculty often bring to academia. Finally, the erasure of tenure-track positions in higher education, combined with the growing inequality between elite and non-elite institutions (where working-class academics struggle to access elite institutions due to structural manifestations of prestige), diminishes the opportunity for working-class academics to gain stability. Given that our interviewees identified stability as a top motivating factor for working-class academics to pursue academia, this is a significant inhibiting factor in the quest to diversify higher education by social class.

From a perspective adapted from organizational theory, this study finds the overarching superstructure or justifying force for class inequality within faculty bodies is how it remains hidden due to a lack of discourse on social class in faculty interactions. This environment is fostered by a lack of opportunities for working-class faculty to express the saliency of their class identity, working-class faculty's sentiments that their struggles are less intense than others, and at times, working-class faculty's fear of stigmatization with discussing their class. These data still confirm previous findings that social class is very salient to the experiences of working-class faculty, even if working-class faculty face barriers in discussing their social class. But the superstructure, particularly the lack of awareness about class, is also upheld by a substructure: a set of implicit assumptions that the effects of a working-class identity can be perceived as personality traits independent of a communal identity, further masking the saliency of social class. All of these factors make one's social class something inherently embedded in the way they experience higher education as a workplace.

Findings from this study echo recommendations for institutions and academic organizations alike from the 2022 Report of the ASA Task Force on First-Generation and Working-Class People in Sociology (Roscigno et al. 2022). Mentorship programs and resources for professional socialization were among the most popular responses to a survey question asking what departments should do to support underrepresented peoples in sociology, including working-class academics. Scholarship has also begun generating data on the importance of these programs: Towers et al. (2020) found significant success in an institutional pilot program for mentoring working-class faculty on "career self-efficacy." As the authors point out, it is essential for mentoring to do no harm, avoid biased and demeaning rhetoric, and empower working-class mentees to "add to, not abandon, their working-class identity in ways that are personally rewarding" (Towers et al. 2020). While these solutions cannot holistically alter the class-based framework of higher education, they do offer a strong, practical means of alleviating the burdens that norms in higher education create.

This study also reveals significant pipeline issues that systematically reproduce inequalities. To some extent, these can also be addressed by policy. The ASA report (Roscigno et al. 2022) also recognizes these pipeline and mobility issues and thus recommends tracking working-class and first-generation representation in administrative positions and journal editorial boards as a means of giving advocates for working-class inclusion a platform. However, because of the connections between institutional affiliation, prestige, and working-class representation identified in this study, we also identify how elite institutions could potentially diversify their cohorts through commitments to accept a percentage of students from state schools or lower-ranked institutions. While it would be best to admit and hire more working-class faculty directly, this may be a creative proxy to practically diversify elite institutional cohorts along class-based lines.

However, merely altering these policies would not eradicate classism from the organizational body. The superstructure and substructure should be acknowledged and addressed, but inevitably, they are the result of social forces that exist independently but inseparably from postsecondary institutions. Instead, it serves as a reminder of the nature of identity-based inequalities in the United States broadly: They are so pervasive in society that eradicating them entirely appears inconceivable, but social action and policy is our best hope to alleviate them as much as possible.

LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

There are a few limitations that this study has that would be best alleviated by further research into these topics. The data set's reliance entirely on sociologists means that the sentiments expressed about prestige, professional development, and the extent to which class identity is discussed may not adequately reflect the experience of academics from all disciplines. Given that many sociologists study social stratification, the participants in this data set may also be more aware of the saliency of subconscious assumptions examined in the substructure and the concept of cultural capital examined throughout the paper. However, even though we can assume they may have an advantage in identifying these factors, we cannot assume that these factors are any more or less prevalent in other disciplines based on this data. Thus, an evaluation of other disciplines' working-class academics is necessary, particularly to document their experiences with prestige, professional development, and the extent to which they discuss social class in professional settings.

Further, this paper extensively discusses the actions and inactions of policymakers and administrators in higher education. However, the majority of participants have no experience in leadership roles at their universities outside of their departments. An evaluation of the policy-driven, internal structure of higher education would benefit significantly from the perspective of people from working-class backgrounds who serve in leadership positions and have everyday experience with other policymakers and the processes they authorize. Overall, the study of social class in higher education would benefit significantly from future scholars taking on these endeavors.

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