

# **Class Perceptions and Attitudes Toward Immigration and Race Among Working-Class Whites<sup>1</sup>**

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*As neighborhoods that were predominantly White become more racially and ethnically diverse, many Whites in those communities respond with feelings of threat and political shifts to the right. Trump’s election in 2016 has often been attributed, at least in part, to such responses among members of the White working class. Building on this work, in the summer of 2017 (and thus after the election) we interviewed 77 working-class White residents of three majority-White cities from the Midwestern United States that had recently become more diverse due to an influx of Latino immigrants and/or an increase in native-born racial minorities. Respondents were asked about their class identity, perceptions of change in their communities, and their attitudes about immigration and racial minorities. Contrary to prevailing narratives regarding the White working class, we found considerable variation in respondents’ reactions to these demographic changes. Notably, these differential reactions are organized by, and potentially rooted in, variation in class identity. Despite all being members of the working class, our respondents conceptualized their class identity according to three types—Class Conflict Aware, Working-class Connected, and Working-class Patriots—that were associated with more favorable or more antagonistic attitudes toward Latino immigrants and domestic racial minorities. This work, therefore, offers a more*

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*nuanced picture of how members of the White working class are responding to ethnoracial demographic changes in the nation.*

Although research on the boundaries and ideologies of the group are long-standing (Aronowitz, 1992; Lamont, 2009), the White working class has been an object of intense scholarly and popular attention since Donald Trump's surprising victory in the 2016 presidential election. Not only is the White working class a politically important population, but it has also often been on the front lines of neighborhood and school integration (Durr, 2003)—and correspondingly at risk of engagement in direct racial conflict (Kefalas, 2003).

The manner in which working-class Whites exercise their considerable political power is informed by their racial views. The recent influx of non-Whites into majority White areas has only sharpened the attitudes of some Whites toward Blacks and non-White immigrant groups (Newman & Velez, 2014; Craig, Rucker, & Richeson, 2018). Research suggests these demographic changes may have also nudged many Whites toward voting for Trump and toward more conservative policy positions (Craig & Richeson, 2014). In economically distressed regions of the country, exposure to non-Whites has accentuated Whites' feelings of intergroup threat—thus generating a context in which nativist appeals meet fertile ground (Knowles & Tropp, 2016, 2018). Working-class Whites' proximity to the front lines of integration and potential group conflict mobilizes them politically and guides their electoral behavior.

The political and strategic importance of the White working class underscores the need to understand this group's attitudes toward immigration and racial minorities, especially in the wake of increasing local and national racial and ethnic diversity. Given their structural location at the juncture of a privileged racial identity and a marginalized class identity, moreover, the racial/ethnic attitudes of members of the White working class may be especially susceptible to fluctuations in their sense of group status or position in American society in the wake of increasing racial/ethnic diversity (Blumer, 1958). Consequently, developing a clear understanding of the dynamic links among class ideology, racial ideology, and group position among the White working class will likely offer both practical insights regarding the political and social behavior of members of this group, and also compelling theoretical insights into how intersections of race and class shape relevant intergroup attitudes.

Developing such a model requires a new understanding of working-class Whites' conceptions of their own racial and class identities—that is, the meaning that members of this group attach to their specific positionality relative to other Whites, racial minorities, and those with higher and lower subjective and objective socioeconomic status. Many scholars have considered the White working class to share a particular set of experiences and, especially, beliefs about race and

immigration, though some researchers have explicitly called for greater specification of the heterogeneity among the group (Diemer, Mistry, Wadsworth, López, & Reimers, 2013; Walley, 2017). Such heterogeneity is especially important to consider when examining mechanisms that link class location with sociopolitical attitudes. For example, though a majority of the White working class voted for Trump (as did a majority of Whites irrespective of social class [Junn, 2017]), a substantial minority—33%—did not (Tyson & Maniam, 2016). There is also considerable variation in working-class Whites' attitudes toward immigration and across a range of racial issues (Fussell, 2014).

The primary objective of the present research is to seek potential sources of this variation. Specifically, in the wake of rising racial/ethnic diversity coupled with a sustained period of economic vulnerability—two salient features of contemporary U.S. society, especially in the Midwest—we explore what factors predict which members of the White working class to hold relatively positive intergroup attitudes and progressive policy positions and which hold more negative intergroup attitudes and more conservative policy positions. To that end, we interviewed White working-class residents of three counties who are majority-White, but who have also experienced a recent influx of non-White residents. One of the three counties took a sharp conservative turn in voting between the 2012 and 2016 elections, whereas the other two did not. The goal of comparing these different locations was to examine whether respondents in these regions also vary in their class identities and reactions to these shifting demographics. We asked respondents about their perceptions of change within their communities as well as their own personal experiences with class discrimination and racial conflict. We then asked about their racial attitudes and support for restrictive immigration policies. Our interviews suggest considerable variation in class identity among our respondents and, further, the potential for these class identities to predict immigration policy support and the tenor of racial attitudes.

### **The White Working Class**

There have been several recent attempts to assess the variegated nature of identity among the White working class, ranging from an ethnography of rural Whites in Wisconsin (Cramer, 2016) to interviews with working-class Whites in London (Gest, 2016). In general, five key themes characterize work on the beliefs and character of the current White working class: a concern with morality, assertions of privilege, anti-elite sentiment, a sense of having less power than in the past, and a sense of marginalization. We briefly review each theme in the following paragraphs.

A common theme running throughout recent treatments of the White working class is a focus on the importance of moral boundaries. Lamont (2009) finds that White working-class men in New Jersey make sense of their world by imposing

a moral order. Within this order, they believe people of their race and social class are good and act properly, whereas those outside the race/class boundary are found morally wanting. This moral superiority is a source of pride in the face of constricted material opportunity. Although primarily a study of the rural poor rather than the White working class, Sherman's (2009) study of a California logging town nonetheless has some resonance for White working-class communities. Her study indicates the powerful hold that the dictum of the work ethic has upon one such community, and the corresponding condemnation of welfare that ensues. "Big government" is hence viewed as the antithesis of proper values. Williams (2017), too, argues that the White working class is primarily oriented around a strong work ethic and a corresponding sense of contempt for "handouts" to the poor.

In addition to a sense of moral superiority, working-class Whites have also asserted a sense of possession over neighborhoods, workplaces, or schools. This assertion of perceived rights to institutional advantages over non-Whites was dramatically shown in the antibusing protests in Boston in the 1970s (Formisano, 2012). When the children of primarily working-class Whites in South Boston were reassigned to schools in predominantly Black neighborhoods (and vice versa), angry protests broke out in defense of "their" neighborhoods and schools. Similarly, a mix of working-class and middle-class Whites in New York City boycotted the schools in their neighborhoods after attempts to integrate them (Rieder, 1985). And in the 1990s, working-class Whites in Boston asserted their ownership of the neighborhood they lived in, the jobs in the community they lived in, and the schools their children attended, to the exclusion of those of other races (and classes) from outside the community (McDermott, 2006).

The assertion of privilege within one's community is sometimes paired with animosity and resentment toward those with power and status outside of it. Anti-elite sentiment has been found to be a common thread linking working-class Whites across many contexts, although it is especially prominent in rural America. Although not a study of the working class per se, Cramer (2016) finds Whites in rural Wisconsin resent affluent urbanites in the state capital who they believe make important decisions that affect their lives. This, in turn, translates into an opposition to "big government" that they believe serves the interest of this urban elite.

Finally, Gest (2016, 2018) highlights the marginalization experienced by the contemporary White working class in the United States and England. Feeling outnumbered by non-Whites and unable to secure reliable employment that pays a living wage, many individuals translate their anxieties about their finances and futures into animosity toward immigrants. The anxiety also often creates a longing. They long for a time in which life felt more secure and predictable.

The findings of the present work reflect the themes observed in this research, although in complicated ways. We will return to the relationship between the

identities and attitudes of the Whites we study and those discussed in previous research in the Discussion.

### **Methods and Analysis Strategy**

We conducted interviews to elicit narratives about class identity that may dovetail with previous categorical research, but perhaps also provide accounts of additional information about the meanings of class in interviewees' everyday lives during a time of increasing ethnoracial diversity. We were especially interested in exploring the connection between these narratives and attitudes expressed toward racial minorities, immigration, and race-related policies. From June through August 2017, we interviewed 77 White working-class residents of three counties: Franklin County, KY; Buchanan County, MO; and Marion County, IN. A total of 91 interviews were conducted with White working-class residents and with the leaders of community groups who worked with the White working class in some way.

#### **Site Selection**

Because we were interested in how members of the White working class are responding to increasing racial/ethnic diversity, we sought interview sites that had experienced increases in their non-White populations—but that nonetheless remained majority White. In addition, we selected counties whose White populations had followed different political trajectories over the same period, despite experiencing comparable increases in their racial/ethnic diversity. Based on data from the U.S. Census and American Community Survey, we established an initial set of candidate counties that, despite their political differences, were similar in a range of demographic and economic respects. We then picked a final set of three similar counties, one conservative and two relatively progressive, based on further inquiry into their histories and populations.

The first step in identifying candidate counties was to compute a score approximating the change in progressivism of potential sites' White populations. To this end, we obtained 2008–2012 voting data for all U.S. counties. A difference score was then computed reflecting each county's change in Democratic voting between 2008 and 2016. As data were not broken down by race, we used an indirect procedure to estimate the change in Whites' Democratic voting rates. First, based on the 2000 Decennial Census and the 2015 American Community Survey, we generated change scores representing the proportional increase in the non-White population of every county. We then simultaneously regressed counties' Democratic voting scores on their non-White population change scores. As might be expected, counties whose Black, Asian, and Hispanic populations had increased from 2000 to 2015 exhibited greater rates of Democratic voting between 2008

and 2016. We reasoned that, because most counties are predominantly White, and non-Whites vote Democratic more reliably than do Whites, the residuals from our regression model would disproportionately reflect unexplained variance in non-Hispanic White voting behavior. Thus, these regression residuals represent our best estimate of Whites' change in progressivism<sup>2</sup> from 2008 to 2016.

After generating county-by-county estimates of Whites' change in progressivism, we culled the list of counties to include only those (i) whose influx of non-Whites fell in the top half and (ii) whose change in White progressivism fell in either the highest or the lowest quintile. These are counties where the White population shrunk considerably from 2000 to 2015, and whose White population became either much more or less conservative during approximately the same period.

Our next goal was to generate a list of demographically and economically similar counties. Multidimensional scaling was used to rank-order every possible pair of counties in terms of their aggregate similarity across several dimensions, including the White population in 2000, the percentage change in minority population from 2000 to 2015, Democratic voting in 2008, total population in 2000, and indices of social class (i.e., average educational attainment and median household income derived from American Community Survey 5-year estimates). Only those county pairs consisting of a highly progressive and a highly conservative county were retained. A list of the 20 most similar such pairs was examined for further inspection.

Based on a qualitative analysis of the candidate county pairs, we chose three socioeconomically and geographically comparable counties as our interview sites. The White population in one of these counties—Buchanan County, Missouri—had become anomalously more than conservative in the face of an influx of racial minorities. The White populations in the other two counties—Marion County, Indiana and Franklin County, Kentucky—underwent an unexpectedly slight conservative shift in the face of a similar minority influx (Table 1).

In each of the chosen counties, the proportional decrease in the White population was substantial. Between 2000 and 2015, Buchanan County's White population decreased from 91% to 84%; Franklin County's from 87% to 82%; and Marion's from 69% to 57%. At the same time, the counties differed drastically in their political trajectories, with Buchanan County seeing a much greater than average drop-off in Democratic voting, with 49% of residents voting for Obama in 2008 and only 33% voting for Clinton in 2016. Although only a very few, highly educated counties saw an increase in Democratic voting between 2012 and 2016, both Franklin and Marion Counties saw decreases that were well below the national average—4% for Franklin and 2% for Marion.

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<sup>2</sup> Many factors other than voting behavior are indicative of progressivism; we are treating voting as a proxy.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Research Sites

	Buchanan County, MO	Franklin County, KY	Marion County, IN
Population, 2015	89,100	50,375	939,020
Change in Black Pop, 00–15	1.7	1.7	3.8
Change in Hispanic Pop, 00–10	3.8	2.0	6.1
Percent White, 2000	91.2	87.4	68.9
Percent White, 2015	83.9	81.7	57.3
Percent Voting Democrat, 2012	44	49	60
Percent Voting Democrat, 2016	33	45	58
Median Household Income, 2015	\$47,964	\$46,315	\$42,168
Percent BA or Higher, 2015	19.5	27	28.3
Category	Conservative	Progressive, small city	Progressive, large urban area

**Table 2.** Sample Description (*N* = 77)

Gender	
Male	58%
Female	42%
Party ID	
Democrat	27%
Republican	42%
Independent	31%
Age	
Mean	48.5
SD	14.6

**Interviews**

Seventy-seven interview respondents were selected from the three locations—Buchanan County, MO (*N* = 26), Franklin County, KY (*N* = 20), and Marion County, IN (*N* = 31). Most of the interviewees were recruited from the major cities in each county: St. Joseph, MO; Frankfort, KY; and Indianapolis, IN. As Table 2 demonstrates, the sample of interviewees was older and more male than the national average. Party identification for White working-class voters nationally is 51% Republican, 34% Democrat, and 15% Independent. Because we did not screen for likelihood of voting, the larger proportion of independents is not surprising.

To be included in the interview study, respondents needed to lack a four-year college degree, identify as White, and reside in the target county. For the purposes of quickly and simply screening an individual for inclusion in the study, the lack of a college degree was used as our proxy of working class. Interviews took place between May 2017 and August 2017, and thus after the 2016 Presidential election, in a variety of public locations and private homes. Potential interviewees were approached in places such as restaurants, parks, laundromats, near the entrances of retail establishments, flea markets, and bars<sup>3</sup>, and asked if they would like to share their opinions about social change in their community in exchange for a \$10 Wal-Mart gift card. We also rented booths at flea markets in St. Joseph and Indianapolis that served a primarily working-class clientele and at a farmer's market in Frankfort that attracted some working-class residents. Interviews took place in the booth, in private corners of public spaces (e.g., a table in the corner of a restaurant or a relatively isolated counter at a laundromat) or in private homes. All interviews were recorded and professionally transcribed.

Interviewees were asked for referrals to others who might like to be interviewed; these referrals did not yield many direct contacts. However, requests for recommendations of places where working-class people hang out did indirectly yield many interviews, especially in St. Joseph. We believe the recruitment strategy yielded a broad, fairly independent sample of White working-class residents, because it did not begin from a particular network or set of referrals that would privilege the inclusion of those most active and involved in the community.

## Interview Guide

We developed the interview guide based upon the results of a pilot study that measured the effects of making class-based discrimination or disadvantage salient on White Americans' racial attitudes (details available upon request). In the experiment, compared with control participants, those who read an article about class-based discrimination tended to report greater warmth toward Whites and to perceive less similarity with non-Whites. Based on these preliminary findings, we decided to focus our interview questions on experiences with class discrimination, strength of a working-class identity as opposed to a White racial identity, and questions about perspective-taking with regard to racial minorities (i.e., hypothetical questions about living life as a member of another racial or ethnic group) as a way to assess perceived closeness. The interviews were semistructured, and thus the questions were not always asked in the order listed or with identical phrasing.

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<sup>3</sup> Interviews with respondents contacted in bars were scheduled for a future date, when the respondents were not drinking.



## **Analysis of Data**

Using Atlas.ti, interview transcripts were initially coded for sensitizing concepts (Charmaz, 2006) in multiple stages, using both focal and axial coding. These included responses to closed-ended questions as well as inductive categories such as personal responsibility. For example, the code “working class = middle class” was used whenever statements indicating that the two classes were the same, anytime the two classes were confused, and anytime professional jobs were listed as working-class jobs. The second step of the analysis was the application of emergent codes within broader concepts, such as the belief that the poor are lacking in personal responsibility. A special focus was placed upon high rates of co-occurring codes, with those of interest highlighted in a matrix of all cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). A review of cases that had clusters of co-occurring codes was then categorized into the three identity groups described in the Results section of this article. The interrater reliability between the two coders was 93%. Discrepancies in codes were discussed and resolved.

## **Results**

### **Working-Class Identity**

Interviewees talked about social class in several different ways, ranging from strong attachment to and a clear definition of a working-class identity to complete confusion about the meaning of the term “social class” and of their place within the social hierarchy. Overall, three strong patterns of working-class identification emerged. The first is that of “Class Conflict Aware” Whites, who perceive and articulate clear differences between the working class and the rich (and occasionally middle class). These differences are a source of tension and reflect a distribution of resources perceived to be fundamentally unfair. The second pattern of identification is that of “Working-class Connected” Whites, who identify positively with the working class as having the qualities of a strong work ethic and an importance to society that those with more income and education might lack. The third pattern is that of “Working-class Patriot” Whites. Similar to the working-class Whites studied by Lamont (2009), they strongly identify as working class, viewing themselves as morally superior to those whom they believe do not share their sense of responsibility and commitment to family, such as the poor.

Although these categories are decidedly not mutually exclusive across respondents (71% of respondents expressed sentiments consistent with one or more of them; for frequencies of identities, see Table 3), they represent three distinctive and important ways of identifying with—and importantly, making meaning about—a working-class structural position. Moreover, the three patterns appear to have specific associations with attitudes toward immigration and racial minorities.

**Table 3.** Frequencies

Class ID category	Percent of total sample	Percent dislike Trump	Percent Female	State distribution	Party allegiance
Class conflict	29	38	45	KY = 43% MO = 27% IN = 27%	Dem = 36% Rep = 32% Ind = 32%
Working class connected	39	56	50	KY = 30% MO = 33% IN = 37%	Dem = 27% Rep = 50% Ind = 23%
Working class patriots	49	25	45	KY = 14% MO = 45% IN = 55%	Dem = 26% Rep = 50% Ind = 24%

Interviewees' narratives suggest that their class identities are shaped by experiences, often dating back to childhood, that made them aware of social class. Working-class Connected Whites, in particular, are likely to report having felt looked down upon by others because of their socioeconomic status at some point in their lives, lending their connection to their class identities a stronger emotional valence than that of most other interviewees. On the other hand, the self-descriptions of the Working-class Patriots can sometimes border on boastful. Both groups typically lack the more abstract, systemic critique of the Class Conflict Aware Whites, the form of class identification most directly associated with progressive racial attitudes.

In the sections that follow, we will first describe these three class identities. We then outline some of the ways that they relate to endorsement of different profiles of attitudes toward immigration and racial minorities.

### **Class Conflict Aware**

Of the three primary types of class identity found among the interviewees, the Class Conflict Aware (or "Conflict") identity was the least common, with 21 out of 77 respondents identifying tension or hostility between the working class and the rich or middle class. This understanding of class manifested itself in two types of responses: (1) the class system is unfair and (2) the rich and/or middle class have negative attitudes toward other classes. Fundamental to the identities of this group is the belief that they are on the losing end of an unfair game. Assessments of the rich as having more than they need or deserve, coupled with a concern that many suffer without what they need to survive, animate their worldviews.

For example, Laura<sup>4</sup>, a 55-year-old cashier in KY, complained how difficult it was for her and her family to make ends meet. She located this difficulty in a larger system of inequality:

<sup>4</sup> All names are pseudonyms, but all occupations are those reported by the respondent.

This is probably gonna be the most stupidest thing I've ever said, I have this feeling in life that if somehow we could all start out just a little bit equally, maybe if we got an education and we each got a million dollars and if we got a company . . . Some people are born with that golden spoon or silver spoon and some haven't. No matter how hard you try you don't get it. I do believe if some of these people that have so much wealth would do more for . . . How do some have so much and some have absolutely nothing? Being stuck on the side that I grew up in, to try and try and try, it's like other people, where does the money come from? How do they ever reach that point to have that much? I just wish that somehow it was equal and we could all start out the same.

Laura critiques an entire system rigged against her and those “on the side I grew up in.” The relative rarity of such a critique among working-class Whites is reflected in the hesitancy with which she raises the issue, assuming that the interviewer will think what she is about to say is “stupid.” Others were more forceful in articulating their concerns about inequality in America.

Sandy, a 60-year-old licensed practical nurse (LPN) in Kentucky, was animated when discussing what she viewed as the disastrous consequences of Trump's presidential election. She tied his victory to a broader system in which elites controlled all institutions, with poor and working people at their mercy. She said, “It's just astounding to me that corporate America can get away with creating a class of people who they keep oppressed by not paying them a living wage, where they have no benefits, and are getting taxpayer entitlement programs, but yet they're making billions, and billions, and billions of dollars so that's an entire class of people that are left out in our democracy and of being able to live and pursue happiness in their life.” Although not politically active herself, Sandy embraced a systemic critique that blames the rich not only for living an unnecessarily lavish lifestyle but also for “oppressing” those without economic opportunity. Although lacking a college degree, Sandy feels that she has been fortunate in her own work life as an LPN yet feels an allegiance with those who have not been able to realize the standard of living she has due to the systematic unfairness of the political economy.

Another respondent spoke of the outright oppression of the poor by the rich, in apocalyptic rather than analytical terms. Vince, a 75-year-old retired sales clerk from Indiana, peppered his interview with quotes from the Bible, many of which centered upon social-justice themes. At one point, he noted, “It's also written, ‘hath not God chosen the poor of this world, rich in faith, heirs to the kingdom, but ye have despised the poor. Do not rich men oppress you and call you before the judgment seat?’ There you go. It's happening.” Vince saw classes at war with each other—not just the poor versus the rich, but the rich versus everyone else. Couched in biblical terms, he expressed a conflict-oriented identity that influenced his attitudes on race, politics, and immigration.

Caleb, a 35-year-old electrician in Kentucky, does not voluntarily identify as working class but instead allies himself with the “not-rich.” He believes that there is a broad plan to denigrate those with fewer resources while holding up

the wealthy as being worthier. "I think it's the media's fault. I think it's all about high class people . . . every time you see middle class or lower class . . . they're always doing something wrong. They are the worst person in the world, they shot somebody. But the high class they are always praised on media, no matter what they did." Although less focused on the direct actions taken by the "high class" to oppress others than Sandy is, Caleb nonetheless sees a world in which there is a fundamental opposition between those at the top of the class hierarchy and those at the bottom. This opposition is not only interpersonal, but also furthered by the actions of an impersonal institution, in this case the media.

Criticisms of the political system in America as dysfunctional are common throughout the class structure. But a subset of those interviewed with a Class Conflict Aware identity locates this dysfunction in a class system that discriminates against those without financial power. Mack, a 53-year-old scrap metal hauler from Indiana, had a progressive set of views across a range of topics. He believed that a number of groups in America were treated unfairly, most commonly poor people, although also "regular" people such as himself. The political system was deeply implicated in this: "It would be great if we could all vote on something. All the people, because there's just a few people representing us. They're not everybody's opinions. It's just their opinion . . . And a lot of them are higher class and they don't know what it is to be out on the street and the people who is out in society. They're just dealing with a few people who sit in a nice house in a nice part of a neighborhood. They don't have an idea about the regular people, or the poor people I should say."

State worker Olivia from Kentucky offered a similar analysis of politics as an arena in which the rich were pitted against the nonrich. "It's usually the haves and have nots, not so much the Republican or Democrat, it's more the haves and have nots. The haves are still trying to put the have nots down further than they have, and we've all worked to get where we are, and still we're not on the scale." The feeling of exclusion Olivia articulates, similar to Mack's, is not simply one of dealing with callous public officials but is instead an assessment of politics as being an arena for class antagonism.

Although the rich are often singled out for critique by the Class Conflict Aware Whites, the middle class is occasionally the target of opprobrium. Ashley, a 25-year-old housekeeper from Kentucky, generalizes from personal experience to a broader critique of the rich and, especially, middle class. "I couldn't be stuck up. I couldn't . . . no, I can't be stuck up. And to me that's what a lot of rich people are. They're stuck up, yes, very stuck up. . . . I've seen some of them, sometimes. You can try to speak to somebody, they're like, 'I ain't talking to you.' But I think middle class do that worse than rich people do, though. I think the middle class just think they're better than everybody, 'cause they got a little more extra money." Ashley was also able to describe a middle-class person in more detail than many of the interviewees, as "casual. Like, maybe slacks and button-up shirt,

stuff like that. No tie.” Her critique of middle-class attitudes was not simply a matter of economic resentment, as she loved Frankfort, primarily because of the many jobs that were available. Rather, she identified clearly opposed classes whose manifestations were expressed in interactions and attitudes.

On a similar note, Drew, a 42-year-old plumber from Kentucky, loathed the arrogant attitudes of the rich. He said, “They act like snobby, and pricks, and shit, really. I don’t think . . . judgmental and stuff.” His interview was peppered with critiques of those with power and sympathy for those without it. After we had finished talking, he thanked me for the opportunity to talk about his feelings, noting that he was surprised by the questions and how much he enjoyed the interview. Like others expressing the Conflict identity, he saw a sharp opposition between the rich (and sometimes middle class) and the working class and poor. This opposition was seen as a stable feature of society that transcended the actions of particular individuals to extend to entire classes of people.

### **Working-Class Connected**

The Working-class Connected interviewees share some characteristics with the Class Conflict Aware identity respondents, such as a perception of the arrogant attitudes of the rich and a set of generally progressive attitudes. However, they differ in that they discuss their experiences of class on a more personal rather than structural level. For them, being working class is an identity with a strong emotional valence that distinguishes them from those without the positive characteristics of the working class, such as a strong work ethic. Unlike the Working-class Patriots, they do not emphasize their hard work as a means of drawing boundaries between themselves and the poor; rather, they view themselves as nobly earning what they have, unlike the rich. They are also much more likely to relate stories of having been looked down upon due to their socioeconomic position than any other group. The experiences they discuss range from criticism endured during high school recess to denigrating comments made by work supervisors.

Some of the Working-class Connected group responded to criticisms that they received—or perceived—for not having a degree or an office job by rejecting the value of a college degree. Others embraced their own value as someone who worked hard and was self-supporting. Frank, a 30-year-old electrician from Missouri, spoke sarcastically about those who admonished him to get a degree. “If you’re in any business to get to the higher ranks requires college . . . Because then they look down on them all the time for not having a degree. ‘Why didn’t you go to college? Why didn’t you guys college? You could be here where I’m at right now if you just would have went to college.’ Frank’s questioning of the value of college was couched within a discourse on the value of trades and his belief that the working person is the backbone of society.

Personal qualities such as “character”—often taking the form of being a hard worker—were commonly mobilized by the Working-class Connected in order to deflect feelings of shame associated with their occupations. Jessica, a 25-year-old secretary in Indiana, had been a restaurant server until shortly before her current job. She said, “When I was a server I was embarrassed to say I was a server. I don’t know why. Not so much when I work at (fancy restaurant), but when I worked at (casual restaurant). Actually, this (casual restaurant) right here [pointing] for four years. And it took me a long time to be proud that I worked there. And then I realized, I don’t ask anyone for anything. I pay all my own bills, I take care of my child. Everything that I have, I’ve worked for. I don’t ask anyone for anything, so why am I ashamed to say where I work?” Like Caleb, Jessica counters the negative attitudes she perceives from those with higher socioeconomic status by asserting her own positive qualities.

In contrast to the Working-class Patriot interviewees, the Working-class Connected compared their work ethic to that of middle-class office workers or rich businessmen. Getting dirty and being blue collar were valorized, especially by the male respondents. Nelson, a 33-year-old painter from Indiana, stated, “I would rather go to a job where I hate it, like I’m staining the rails on these decks all fucking day. I’m standing out in the sun, sweating my ass off, but I’ll sit there and I’ll catch myself and I’ll be like . . . but really, it’s not that hard. I’m not dealing with stress. I’m not dealing with people barking at me. I’m out here in nature, painting, and it’s hot but it’s a hell of a lot better than sitting at a computer, typing. I’ll do that any day of the week than I will go sit at computer and make 20-grand more a year. No, give me that any day.” Nelson feels his hard physical labor is vastly preferable to a white-collar job.

Likewise, Nick, a 52-year-old technician from Kentucky, heaped praise upon the blue-collar worker.

[Who do you picture when I ask you to think of a working-class person?]

“I tried to embody that. Let me see. You want me to pick somebody?”

[It doesn’t have to be an individual. Just what kind of person do you picture?]

A person with a sincerely legitimate work ethic that understands that we call it work because it’s work. . . . We all work for a reason. I do admire the idea of a person who embraces that is not ashamed of the fact that they got dirty today or they work hard or they broke a sweat. That they got some cardiovascular exercise out of it for free and didn’t have to go pay for it in a gym.”

Nick, like Nelson, draws a boundary between the working class that sweats as it labors and the middle class that does not—unless paying for the opportunity in a gym.

### **Working-Class Patriots**

Although comparisons between the working class and the middle class were markers of the Working-class Connected group, invidious distinctions between the

working class and the poor are more typical of the Working-class Patriot group. While the Working-class Patriot interviewees thoroughly endorsed the value of hard work—and their own work ethic—they also emphasized the responsibility of the working class, not just in terms of work but also in terms of family. Family support was often given as the reason for their own sacrifices, and the importance of providing for a family was noted even by those without children.

Cory, 38, a factory worker in Missouri, said the following in response to a question asking him to picture a working-class person: “Somebody that has a commitment to working. Somebody who works 40 hours a week, whether it’s nine to five, or six to three, or the overnight shift, 11 to seven. Just somebody that’s family oriented that’s working for a reason. I actually go through this once in a while, I’m like, ‘I go work every day, so that I can have a place to stay. I have a place to stay so that I can go to work every day. What the hell is going on?’” The reason to work hard, in Cory’s mind, is to support a family. He himself did not have a significant other or children, yet endorsed the notion that the working class engages in labor for the higher purpose of family responsibility. His lack of an immediate family perhaps generates his sense of being on a treadmill of working and paying a mortgage.

As Derek, a 46-year-old construction worker from Missouri with a large Confederate flag tattoo, succinctly describes the importance of family responsibility:

[So when I ask you to picture a working-class person, who do you picture?]

“Me.

[You? Why?]

Because that’s all I’ve known. . . . You know, I’ve got a family to support, I’ve gotta work.”

Supporting a family is the fundamental reason to work, and work is fundamental to Derek’s personhood. His work ethic and defense of his family were the dominant themes throughout his interview, as he even made a point of noting that he went hungry so his children could eat during a spell of unemployment.

The Working-class Patriot group is not only proud of the ability of the working man (and occasionally woman) to provide for their family, but also makes a point of noting the superiority of the working class to the poor and the low-wage worker. Ron, a 50-year-old carpenter from Indiana, was upset at those who received government assistance. He explicitly compared them to people like himself:

[Do you identify most as working class, American<sup>5</sup> or white?]

Working class.

[Yeah, and why would you say that?]

Because nobody should get nothing for free. If you get something for free then you’re just gonna expect something else for free. I mean it’s just gonna be like that. But if you’re gonna

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of the meanings attached to American identity, see Schildkraut (2014).

work for it, you're gonna appreciate it more, it's gonna mean more to you, it's . . . Working class, they're the ones that's living the dream, as I call it the dream.

If there is a dream. I mean, they're the ones that's doing it right.

Throughout the interview, Ron voiced disapproval of the able-bodied who refused to work, at the same time criticizing the tax structure for being too hard on the "rich."

Margaret, a 71-year-old disabled farmer from Missouri, distinguished the working class not only from the poor but also from low-skill labor. "I would say the working class is the one that has put forth the effort to make a little bit higher life for yourself instead of just flipping burgers or whatever. My dad was a mechanic and never had a lesson or whatever, but whatever he did, it was done right or he wouldn't do it. If you're not going to do it right, don't do it at all." Unlike members of the Class Conflict Aware and Working-class Connected groups, Margaret had only positive things to say about rich people; at the same time, she criticized those who drop out of school and take jobs at McDonald's as not trying hard enough. The boundaries drawn around the working class are much more rigidly drawn between her own position and those below her than they are between her position and those above her.

### **White Working-Class Identities and Attitudes Toward Immigration and Race**

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, the image of the White working class person often portrayed in the media was that of a nativist, if not racist, who felt threatened by their economically precarious situation. Although that image is certainly apt for some of our White working class interviewees, a substantial number of them had views on race and immigration that ranged from neutral to progressive. Indeed, the typology of class identity that emerged in our interviews relates to variation in attitudes toward immigrants and racial minorities. Specifically, Class Conflict Aware respondents expressed the most positive attitudes about both immigration and race, whereas as the Working-class Patriot respondents expressed the most negative attitudes regarding both. Class Connected respondents, by contrast, expressed sympathy for and fairly positive attitudes toward immigrants and relatively moderate attitudes toward racial minorities. Although we have no evidence for causal connections between identity type and attitudes, we will demonstrate associations between the two below.

#### **Class Conflict Aware**

The Class Conflict Aware group, in particular, believed that immigrants were treated unfairly and that racism is a problem in society that needs to change. This



group was similar to the Class Connected group in endorsing a widely held belief that Mexicans work hard, but Class Conflict Whites were also adamant in asserting that immigrants have not done anything wrong. Working-class Connected Whites emphasized that immigrants were underpaid.

The positive stereotype of Mexicans as hard workers was clearly stated by Caleb, the electrician from Kentucky:

[So imagine you were a Mexican for a day, what do you think your life would be like?] Digging ditches, mowing lawns, being in the back scrubbing dishes, something like that, I mean I don't, I mean that's stereotypical to me . . . Hard workers. I didn't say anything bad about them, I mean they are hard workers. They are not gonna stop, they are going to work 16 hours a day for you, if you want them to. And . . . hard working, if you're going to be a Mexican for a day. And I don't want to be a Mexican for a day. I don't want that. I don't want to work that hard, I mean I will, but I don't want to.

Sensitive enough to acknowledge that he is repeating a stereotype, Caleb communicates an admiration for Mexicans<sup>6</sup> that is so heartfelt that he is thankful he need not work so hard himself.

In response to the same question about what her life would be like if she were to become a Mexican for a few days, Barbara, a food server from Missouri states, "It would be a little on the hard side 'cause a lot of, because of Trump. A lot of people in St. Joe are really kind of down on Mexicans. I don't have a problem with it. If I did, I have a niece that is like a daughter to me and she's half Mexican." Barbara's awareness of the plight of Mexicans seems obvious given her family relationship to a Mexican-American, although a number of interviewees (most of them female) mentioned relatives who were part Mexican or Black in one breath and uttered nativist or racist sentiments in the next. For Barbara, her distance from the attitudes of her community is in keeping with her critique of an unfair tax system and her stance against anti-Black racism.

Several of the interviewees were even stronger in their insistence that immigrants had not done anything to deserve the negative treatment they were receiving, both from other residents as well as from Trump. Olivia, a state worker from Kentucky, said:

[S]tarting with this wall that he [Trump] wants to put up, with this travel ban that he wants to put up. Because not every Mexican that comes here, not every Muslim that comes here, not every different race that comes here is to kill us or rape us or all that other stuff. They're looking for a better life for their families too, because like everybody else. There's bad apples in every tree. Most serial killers are white people who were born and raised right here. McVeigh, who did the Oklahoma bombings, he was a white man from the hills somewhere, I can't remember . . . It's not the other races that are coming here so much as our infrastructure is so messed up right now, because they want to stop all these different races from coming in and that's wrong.

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<sup>6</sup> "Mexicans" was the term used to refer to immigrants by members of all identity categories. Latinos and Hispanics were not commonly used terms. The interview questions were adapted to match the local discourse.

Olivia's sense that Trump unfairly targets a single group with the wall he proposes to build was shared by other interviewees. Ashley, the housekeeper who had earlier critiqued the classist attitudes of the middle-class, stated that "I don't think you should put up a wall. I just think he [Trump] needs to pay attention to more than just the Mexicans. There's so many other people out there that's trying to destroy the US, it's not Mexicans doing it. So I think they need to lay off the Mexicans for a while and look at somebody else that's actually trying to hurt America." Like Olivia, Ashley acknowledges that there are those who want to "hurt America," whether from within or without. Mexicans, however, are not among those who are thought to pose a threat.

Although most of those with the Class Conflict identity directed their sympathy explicitly at Mexicans, several also extended their frustration with unfair treatment to all immigrant groups. For instance, Drew became especially animated when discussing the general topic of immigration. Not just angry about Trump's proposed wall, he also decried general nativist attitudes. He said, "All Muslims aren't terrorists and all Muslims aren't bad. In my opinion, it's like if you see . . . It can be Muslim, it can be Afghanistan people or anything. You don't have to judge them off the terrorist attacks because all of them are not like that but they get the rap for it. It doesn't matter what you're trying to do or where you're staying, they don't like you. They're like, 'Go back to where you're from,' or whatever. You know? Then their own people are killing their own people, you know? I feel sorry about that. How would you feel if Americans were killing Americans for no reason?"

This sense of unfairness toward immigrants extends to a broader awareness of racism and prejudice in the communities of those with Class Conflict identities. More so than any other group, they spoke the most frequently about race relations and were the least likely to express a stereotype or use a racial slur. In several cases, members of this group relayed incidents where they actively intervened on behalf of a person of color. The Class Conflict group shared an awareness of prejudice with the Working-class Connected group (discussed in the following section), but they differed in their beliefs about the severity of contemporary racism. The Working-class Connected group felt that the media, in particular, often made it seem as though race was a bigger problem than it was, whereas those in the Class Conflict group acknowledged the negative state of race relations and expressed a desire for them to improve.

Mack was vocal in his support of the poor, working class, and non-Whites throughout the interview. He did not hesitate when asked what he considered to be the biggest problem facing the United States to respond, "Prejudice towards each other. That's what it is. Most of them won't work together. They don't want to help the other one. They want to get better themselves or help the White and not help the Black and not help the Mexicans. That's the major problem." Much as Mack earlier described a fundamental opposition between the rich and the poor

and working man, so too does he identify animosity between racial groups as the central failing of the country.

Genealogy figured into the responses of several interviewees, usually as a means of championing their ancestors for overcoming the hardships that today's racial and ethnic minorities complain about. However, Olivia drew something very different from her journey through her family's past. Already seeing her class position in the world as one opposed to those with power, she focused more on abstract historical lessons about group oppression than family members' triumph over obstacles.

I'm doing my genealogy, and I come across a flyer from the 1800s I think, where Indian lands were sold off and the Indians could not even buy their own property. That's how a lot of the Indians lost their land, their reservations that were shut down, is because the White man was able to come in and buy the property for pennies on the dollar.

[Do you think any other group has had as bad a problem as the Indians?]

I believe the same thing with the black man being a slave. I talk about genealogy at work with a couple black co-workers, they know it's a hostility that's in their history but they don't want to know . . . to have come from a slave back then.

[Why do you think that is?]

I think it's just because it's such a dark part of their history, and it's horrific. The slaves had to endure more, to me, than an Indian in the massacres. The Indians were killed and it was done and over with. The black man tried to leave, they tried to better themselves . . . and they still had to work the same job.

Olivia discusses slavery not in the context of minimizing the current struggles of Black Americans as some Whites do, arguing, for example, that slavery was so long ago that it was no longer relevant to racial inequality today. Instead, she connects the current feelings of her coworkers to the horrors of slavery as something that persists.

Other interviewees with the Class Conflict identity relayed instances of active stands they had taken against racism. Barbara had spent a brief period of time helping to manage the restaurant in which she had been (and would continue to be) a server. She recounted, "Before I took over managing this (restaurant), the guy that was managing it, he called people in for interviews and he was highly prejudiced. There was no Blacks whatsoever working in the (restaurant). We worked it. When I took over being manager, that changed. That and the fact that there are parolees that honestly just need a break and would be good. One of the first hires I did was a Black parolee. Boy did my boss have a fit with that. I told him what I thought of him and his so-called rules and by the time I was done with him he says, 'I see your point.' He didn't give me no trouble anymore after that." Barbara's stand against racial discrimination included a sense of pride not just in doing the morally correct thing but also in standing up to someone with more power than she had.

### Working-Class Connected

Interviewees with a Working-class Connected identity share the Class Conflict identity group's positive disposition toward immigrants, and are strongly committed to the notion that both natives and the foreign-born should be treated equally. In contrast to the Class Conflict identified group, the Working-class Connected group focused upon the economic contributions of Mexican immigrants. In addition to voicing the commonly held positive stereotype of Mexicans as hard workers, they also felt that Mexicans were underpaid. In sum, they felt there should be equal pay for equal work.

The Working-class Connected also acknowledged the existence of racism in their communities as well as in American society. However, they felt that race relations were not actually as bad as they were portrayed in the media. Although not endorsing the existence of reverse racism that their Working-class Patriot counterparts did, they nonetheless downplayed the severity of racial conflict. They essentially believe that racism exists, that it is wrong, but that it is not as significant a problem as some think it to be—perhaps because their conception of racism centered on individual bigotry rather than structural barriers that impede minority advancement (O'Brien et al., 2009; Rucker, Duker, & Richeson, 2019).

Work is central to the Working-class Connected group's egalitarian attitudes toward immigrants, in general, and Mexicans, in particular. Immigrants were repeatedly defined as a hard-working people who failed to get their due. Administrative assistant Jessica said, "... there's people that come over here and work on visa, they're part of the working class when they're here. You know what I mean? ... That's what makes the world go round is the work ... Everybody doing the work that they're meant to be doing. And I don't think that Americans are more important than people from other countries. Not to me. I mean, obviously I love my country. This is the best country in the world, so they say. And I'm blessed to live here. But so are other people blessed to live where they live too." For Jessica, country of origin is less important than class status when considering the worth of an individual—revealing that, for her, the working class is not a racialized category.

Amy from Missouri made an invidious distinction between Whites and immigrants, believing immigrants to have a superior work ethic. When asked, "How hard is it for a White person to get ahead today?," she responded, "Oh it's very hard. Especially if they're lazy and they don't wanna get a job. They always blame all them Blacks and Mexicans and Africans. Hey, they had opportunity just as well as you did. They were just the smart ones to take it. That's how I see it." Amy goes beyond endorsing the positive stereotype of Mexicans as hard workers to castigating Whites who complain about immigrants taking their jobs. Although one would think that Amy's profile as a White working-class Republican in a pro-Trump city in Missouri would lead her to endorse the notion that

immigrants are taking American jobs, her allegiance to a broader working-class identity transcends the ideology with which her demographic group is associated.

Bartender Angie also acknowledged the amount of hostility facing Mexican immigrants in her community in Kentucky. When asked, “If you were to become a Mexican person for a day what do you think your life would be like that day?,” she responded, “I think it would be a lot harder than what . . . it would be as a White American. Because there is so much tension with people. A lot of people wouldn’t give them the time of day.” This awareness of anti-immigrant attitudes extended to an awareness of anti-Black racism among a number of the Working Class Connected interviewees. In Kentucky, Nick stated that, “We still have a large segment of the population that is entrenched in the isolationism and reluctance, it’s learned behavior. They’re not open to it. It’s taught. On a deeply personal level, do you hate, you know what I’m saying?”

“People, especially with the Trump administration, it’s almost giving people the go-ahead to be okay about talking about it. Where it used to be that they kept a low profile and do it behind and now it’s a little more dramatized. I think overall it’s gotten better in that we have race awareness and more people are rising above the places but there still is a big hunk of people out there that are angry people and fall on the severe problem with these people.” Although Nick emphasized the improvements in race relations over time—his wife was Black and told searing tales of discrimination from her childhood—he nonetheless acknowledged that open racism continues to exert an influence.

Several of the Working Class Connected interviewees who had grown up in small towns discussed the severe racism they remembered seeing there. Angie, the bartender from Kentucky, grew up in a small town in Alabama, and its racist discourse continued to shape her perceptions of how much racism exists in America. “I grew up in a one-horse town, honestly, and nobody was any different than any other. Racial . . . very, very racist people there. We had one Black guy that I grew up with and he was a star football player but he was deaf. God love him if he could actually have heard . . . Just small, closed-minded, Southern town, you know.” Although she acknowledged that race relations were much better in Franklin than they were in Alabama, her early experiences nonetheless leant her a sensitivity toward the prejudice that continues to confront Black Americans.

Despite the often-clear recognition that racial prejudice is a problem in their communities, Working-class Connected respondents nonetheless thought that race relations were much better than the media portrayed. Nelson from Indianapolis became especially animated when discussing how close he was to the Black community and how much at odds this was with portrayals of a vast gulf between Blacks and Whites.

(The media) try to make everything out into race issues that really it’s not. Which I can’t speak about other parts of America, like I really can’t, but here, especially . . . Indiana Black Expo is going on right now in downtown Indianapolis, I could go walking downtown

Indianapolis with all these black people down there and not even blink an eye. . . . I was down there and in the midst of all of it, all the time and never once questioned, “Oh my God, am I safe?” I just feel like they blow everything out of proportion. Like I said, I don’t know what goes on in the rest of America but, here, I just went and got new tires put on the back of my car at 38th and Capital, which is like the ghetto-est area and it’s all black guys that did it but I felt more comfortable going there than I feel going out to Hickville to some place and pulling it. It is what it is.

Using his own personal experience as evidence against the existence of hostile race relations in his community, Nelson believes that the media are sensationalizing racial conflict. He generalizes from his own personal connections—much as he did with his own personal connections to the poor and working class—to develop an understanding of the tenor of race relations. Although this is a strikingly different position than that of the Class Conflict Aware Whites, who understand racial conflict to be a significant problem that must be addressed, so too is it a different position than that of Working-class Patriot interviewees who see reverse racism as a problem.

The solution that electrician Frank poses is to shift the focus away from negative media coverage of Blacks to negative coverage of Whites. He said, “Here’s one thing the media could do, quit blowing up all the things about Black people that happen and blow up some things about White people that are happening. That could definitely influence the fact that, hey, maybe instead of showing all the bad about Black people, show the bad about White people too, and maybe it might feel like we’re more equal.” For Frank, the key to racial equality is equal representation—if presented with the positive and negative of all racial groups, racial inequality would dramatically improve.

### **Working-Class Patriots**

The attitudes of the Working-class Patriot group are strikingly different than those of both other groups, as they exhibit nativist and anti-Black sentiments that are rarely found among other interviewees. In many respects, this group exhibits an orientation toward immigrants and non-Whites that have come to define the stereotypical White working-class Trump supporter. The general attitude is one of perceived threat, whether that threat be manifested in terms of the feared loss of jobs, loss of safety, or loss of cultural dominance.

The harshest anti-immigrant sentiment was expressed by a subset of the Working-class Patriot interviewees who asserted that immigrants had no right to be in the United States at all. This was sometimes described as a sense of ownership of the country by the native-born; other times it was presented as cultural nationalism. These interviewees also clearly felt threatened by immigrants in their communities, as they expressed concerns about job loss as well as a belief that immigrants commit crimes at a high rate.

Grace, a 60-year-old factory worker from Missouri, was excited about doing the interview precisely because she could share her views about immigration with me. She was a strong Trump supporter, drawn to his anti-immigration message.

[What do you think the biggest problem facing the country is?]

Those foreigners. They need to stay the heck out of here. We need to straighten our own house up before we can help anyone else. We can't expect to have all these foreigners to come in and how are we gonna mix that cake? How are we gonna mix all these people? We are not gonna bake that cake. I'm sorry, it's gonna be a lot of killing, a lot of shootings and hurting people. Terrorism. There was a guy in Canada, I know . . . , he was supposed to have a green card to go to Canada. He was from a foreign land. He had a green card to go to Canada. I think it was in Minnesota, he was in Minnesota and sliced the police in his neck at an airport. He said "Allah", you know all for their god and "you're done and were gonna keep coming over here and we're gonna keep doing that."

Grace's comments are riddled with misinformation, yet reflect a palpable sense of fear. Those from "a foreign land" are only here to hurt Americans like her. In her mind, they pose a religious threat, a cultural threat, and most strongly a threat of violence. Grace had earlier praised the strong sense of responsibility of the working class and noted the sacrifices members of this class make despite financial hardship. To her, immigrants are the antithesis of responsibility. She not only viewed them as potentially violent as in the above quote, but thought they took advantage of social services, unjustly receiving resources that they did not earn.

The perceived economic threat posed by immigrants loomed large for a number of the Working-class Patriot individuals. In contrast to members of the other two groups of interviewees who viewed immigrants as especially hard working, this group saw them as taking advantage. In some cases, this sense of threat was felt at the individual level, as it was with Ron, the carpenter from Indiana: "Well it's harder now than it used to be. Just because our country has been so helpful to these other countries that it's kicking our own . . . I mean we open the door for the people who had the hurricanes and we got the Somalians here, we got Mexicans, we got Asians. I mean we're almost a minority here anymore. I mean that's just the way I feel about it. We're almost a minority and I believe if we didn't, I mean, I'm not racist to anybody. . . . It's a, I just feel like I don't have the job I want because of that. I believe if we would of stayed America instead of bi-America I would be able to have the job that I wanted." Ron sees the world as starkly divided between the native-born and the non-native-born; the mere existence of the latter group means Ron loses out. Given Ron's beliefs about the working class to which he belongs, his moral superiority should have provided for a better job if not for immigrants.

Disabled farmworker Margaret thought native-born workers were being unfairly denied employment opportunities because they were being replaced rather than retrained. Unlike many other Working-class Patriot interviewees, Margaret

does not express animosity toward immigrants, but instead laments efforts at helping “Americans.” She said, “I think keeping what industry we have here and, instead of importing outside people to come in and work here, there or something else, take the people we’ve got. If they have to be trained, fine, train them, give them an apprenticeship or something like that, and let them learn how to do it instead of bringing in somebody from some other country or from some other place or whatever, and maybe help some of the people we have here that are willing to work or want to work but just don’t know how or know what to do.”

Working-class Patriot interviewees not only expressed economic threat from immigrants, they also described feeling culturally threatened. Some focused specifically on the attire of Muslim women, one noting that it should only be worn in a place of worship, not in Wal-Mart. Several others were distressed that many immigrants did not speak English. Factory worker Cory vented, “We allow other cultures to come here. They all have no anticipation of learning our language. We don’t have a national language, so you can’t say ‘our language.’ I think the idea of having government assistance papers written in Spanish is ridiculous. Going into the Driver’s License Bureau for paperwork written in Spanish is ridiculous. I live in the middle of the United States, very far away from Mexico. You should not be bringing your children into my local district and putting a very big choke on the funding for my schools so that the few children in this classroom, and the one child in that one, and three children in that one, and all of those can all have their own specific translators. Then we also have to have it printed bilingually. It just makes no sense. If we don’t fix that, that part’s going to be bad, still. It’s only going to get worse. We can’t afford it as it is.” Cory combines his anger at immigrants (primarily from Mexico) supposedly refusing to learn English with another source of concern among Working-class Patriot interviewees—their undue benefit from public resources.

Many of the Working-class Patriot interviewees spoke of a general sense of threat, worrying that their communities were becoming overrun with immigrants. This was especially the case in Missouri, even though the rate of change in the immigrant population was not appreciably more than in the other two locations. Construction worker Randall felt that the recruitment of non-native workers by a local factory led to an increase in crime and drug use that was spiraling out of control.

We’ve never had so many immigrants come into St. Joe as we have in the last few years, or ten years since we’ve had a packing house. And it’s not for the good. It’s really, it’s not for the good. The crime rates went up. The drug rate, drug problem and most of that is from what they brought into the packing house. They bring them in and this that and the other. But other than that . . . life’s pretty simple. It really is.

That’s my main concern is the drugs and the illegal immigrants and even the immigrants period what they’re bringing in, embedded . . . I see them all the time coming from Wyandotte County, Kansas. I see the vans. I live right off the interstate, and for me to go to



the store or anything I have to get on the interstate and it just seems like I'm all the time, at the time they're bringing them in. They ship them in.

Plus, what they don't understand is, you might bring in one good person that's working in the factory but then they bring a whole family in. And people don't realize that. Then, let's just say this factory, they have to have their food sources, they are specialty in all that whether you're Sudanese, whether you're Mexican, whether you're Guatemalan. They set up these stores and that brings more in. Where you might bring one in, you're bringing a half dozen. One good one, but a half dozen bad ones. Now, I'm sorry but that's the truth. We see it here.

Even though Randall is focused upon immigrants who are coming to St. Joseph to work, he is not concerned about threats to his successful career as a construction worker. Instead, he fears for the quality of life of the community he has long known.

Many Working-class Patriot Whites experience a different kind of threat from Blacks. Rather than express concern about an influx of Blacks into their communities, a number of interviewees were upset about reverse racism. They denied that White racism was a current problem, but believed that the pendulum had swung in the opposite direction. The evidence they provided for such a shift were, in some cases, national events such as the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. Others described occasions in which they felt that Blacks were not treating them kindly, in contrast to the positive relationships they had with them in the past.

Factory worker Grace discussed a change in the tenor of her interactions with Blacks over time. She went on to say, "I just try to get along. I think that's the way most people are, the Whites trying to get along with the Blacks. I think the Blacks, they've got the upper hand now and they're gonna use it. Okay, so 'why are you talking to me crackers?' I just get a bad feeling with them. They're not trying to get along. I don't know. Me myself, I think I've gotten a better attitude trying to get along with them. I just don't think that the intermixed people should be intermixed. I think you need to stay with your own kind." Grace's observation that Blacks have "the upper hand now" suggests that she connects her difficult interracial interactions to threatened White dominance. Despite earlier pronouncements of trying to get along with Blacks, in the wake of describing perceived increased Black power, she believes racial segregation is warranted.

Derek from Missouri expressed puzzlement over the negative interactions he had with Blacks, believing that he was being misunderstood. In contrast to many other respondents, including Grace, Derek saw his fraught relationships with Blacks to have been a relative constant over time. As Derek was describing his difficulties interacting with Blacks, he pulled up his shirt sleeve:

Everybody is set in their own ways. It's just like my tattoo right here on my arm. Okay. It says "The South Will Rise Again", it's a rebel flag. You don't know how many arguments I've been in over that tat.

[Really? People give you a hard time about it?]

Yep.

[Why?]

Mainly black people. Because they think it stands for racism. And it does not. If you go back into your history books, this is the flag that the south picked up between the war of the north and the south. It does not stand for racism. But there's a lot of people that got that view. They have that misconception that that stands for racism.

The source of Derek's difficult relationships with Blacks became startlingly clear as he showed off his tattoo of a Confederate flag. The interview with Derek took place about one month before the conflict stoked by White supremacists in Charlottesville, and the ensuing controversy over confederate monuments. Nonetheless, there had been ample media coverage of the contested symbolism of the flag in the preceding time, and Derek was clearly aware of its association with White supremacy. Yet he interpreted the response of Blacks he interacted with as unreasonable, if not reverse racism.

More typical were the reactions of Cory, the factory worker from Missouri. He bristled with anger over the rise of social movements demanding recognition and equality for Blacks. He said, "This whole Black Lives Matter movement, it's a complete joke upon our whole entire fabrication of the nation. That's not to say that Black lives don't matter, but they're no more important than anyone else. They shouldn't have any more rights than any of us. It's actually creating a bigger division. Those people that are out there saying that are very, very, very racist. They think that everybody else owes them something. When the majority of population had absolutely nothing to do with any prior incidents. Nor have any of those people actually experienced any of that." Cory's description of reverse racism hinges less upon personal interactions and more upon his assessment of national events. His comments reflect a strong commitment to White dominance, as he is essentially asking, "How 'dare' you ask for rights and resources!" While the "All Lives Matter" counterpoint to the Black Lives Matter movement is a common refrain nationally, Cory's heavy emphasis upon the "racism" of those in the movement reflects a sense of being on the defensive that was shared by other Working-class Patriot interviewees.

There was a corresponding sense among many of the Working-class Patriot interviewees that anti-Black racism no longer existed. Grace, the factory worker from Missouri, felt that "We need to get along. We don't need 100 years ago or 80 years ago you know, or more than that, 100 years ago. We don't need the slavery thing no more. It's done. You all need to get over it. I'm talking about the Blacks. They need to get over it. It wasn't them. Not now. They need to stop it." Not only does she believe that racism is no longer a factor in the lives of Black Americans, she feels that even the historical existence of extreme racism should

not be discussed. Many of the most conservative of the Working-class Patriot Whites repeatedly emphasized the importance of ending any discussion of racism, sexism, or any other source of social division.

Construction worker Randall is a case in point: “The best way to get rid of racism is don’t talk about it . . . In high school, I hate to say it but I was in a fraternity that it was our job to keep order between Blacks and Whites. It seemed like we had a racial problem growing up, which they were fighting for their rights. But still, they have the same rights as we do now, why keep fighting? Stop fighting, stop talking about it. Just be love thy neighbor and stop all this bullshit. That’s what it all boils down to. We’ve got to stop talking about it. What gender, what race, just stop talking about it.” After his astonishing admission that he was once involved in an organized attempt to forcibly maintain White dominance, Randall allows that Blacks emerged victorious from the lingering civil rights struggle of the 1970s. These relative victories should have spelled the end of any further attempts to displace White (male) dominance—a dominance that should be maintained with silence (Chow & Knowles, 2015).

### **Distinguishing Features of White Working-Class Identities**

The readiness with which the White interviewees spoke about their position as members of the working class makes clear that this is, for them, a salient social identity. At the same time, the complexity of their responses demonstrates that working-class Whites—despite being in a similar socio-structural position—attach very different meanings to working-class identity. Three recurring themes stand out as bases for distinguishing Class Conflict Aware, Working-class Connected, and Working-class Patriot Whites.

### **Upward Versus Downward Invidious Comparisons**

Many of the interviewees compared the working class favorably to one or more other social classes. White working-class identities, however, are distinct with respect to the direction of these invidious comparisons. In particular, Working-class Patriots differed from both Class Conflict Aware and Working-class Connected Whites in their critique of the poor and empathy for the rich. Although our Conflict Aware and Class Connected interviewees decried structural and personal discrimination perpetrated by the upper class (and sometimes middle class) against the working class, Working-class Patriots trusted that rich came to their wealth through talent and hard work and even expressed sympathy for rich people’s tax burdens. Working-class Patriots’ admiration for those above them in the socioeconomic hierarchy might reflect a strong belief in upward social mobility—and therefore Patriots’ own chances of becoming affluent.

## **Racialization of Working-Class Identity**

A second distinction between identity types has to do with the subjective relationship between class and race—in particular, the degree to which a working-class identity is racialized. Class Conflict Aware and Working-class Connected respondents rarely equated “working class” with “White,” instead exhibiting a willingness to count anyone who is hard-working, be they Blacks or Latino immigrants, as members of the category. In stark contrast, Working-class Patriots tended to exclude racial out-groups and immigrants from the valorized “working class” status. For these Whites, questions concerning working-class identity often spontaneously elicited critiques of non-Whites’ alleged moral failings (e.g., lack of industry and concern for family). This pattern implies that exclusionary racial attitudes are deeply connected to identity for Working-class Patriots, who simultaneously “other” non-Whites on the basis of both race and class (and do so in inexorably moral terms).

## **Individualized Versus Structural Conceptions of Discrimination**

Our interviews reveal a third major distinction between working-class White identities—namely, the level at which Whites conceive of intergroup discrimination. This proves especially important in understanding differences between Conflict Aware and Class Connected Whites. These groups both see the working class as targets of discrimination by those above them in the socioeconomic hierarchy. Yet, although Conflict Aware Whites tended to portray such discrimination in structural terms—often referring to ways in which the economic system is stacked against working people—Class Connected Whites were more likely to recall specific instances in which they were denigrated or treated unfairly by others. This difference echoes research on individual vs. structural conceptions of racism (e.g., O’Brien et al., 2009; Rucker et al., 2019). Interestingly, Working Class Patriots displayed a mix of structural and individualized interpretations of discrimination—with the common thread of placing Whites on the receiving end of bias. Some members of this group recalled instances in which they felt disrespected or underappreciated by non-Whites and immigrants, whereas others spoke in broad terms of how social institutions now place Whites at a relative disadvantage.

## **Discussion**

Working-class identity is often treated as a clearly bounded, uniform status. With few exceptions (e.g., Beider, Harwood, & Chahal, 2017), attempts to define working-class identity have hinged upon factors such as the self-recognition of

the group as an entity with agency or as a single basis for political action. The variegated nature of this identity is not often discussed.

Nonetheless, our findings do resonate with previous studies of working-class and rural Whites. Although studying quite different populations, both Cramer (2016) and Hochschild (2016) find a strong anti-elite sentiment among their research subjects. The respondents in our class conflict category also exhibit strong anti-elite sentiment, although it is paired with a demand for more government intervention to provide social support rather than less. This is perhaps a reflection of the relatively urban location of our interviewees, in contrast to Cramer's, where rurality was a strong component of her interviewees' identities.

The other main thread of previous research—the emphasis on working-class moral superiority, hard work, rights to “their” neighborhoods and institutions, and feelings of loss or displacement in the world—characterizes the sentiments expressed by respondents in the Working-class Patriot group. This category encompasses the prototypical working-class group that has been portrayed not only in social science literature but also in popular culture. Indeed, they were a majority of our interviewees. Notably, absent from much previous literature is the Working-class Connected group, although this category is perhaps closest to the stigmatized poor and working-class Whites identified by Hartigan (1999) and McDermott (2006), as this group is animated by the significant impact of being looked down upon.

This study demonstrates the importance of conceptualizing White working-class identity as consisting of multiple forms and allowing members of the community to narrate the meaning they assign to their class position, themselves. The ways in which individuals in similar structural positions understand the socioeconomic hierarchy and their roles in it have implications for their ideas about other groups. Although class position is often theorized to affect racial and immigration attitudes, the effect of the identities of occupants of particular class positions on attitudes has remained under-theorized. This study provides a road map for understanding how such identities might be related to these sociopolitical attitudes, especially in the wake of a diversifying nation.

Voting behavior and, potentially, the party allegiances of some working-class Whites may be more malleable than often assumed. Drawing similarities between perceived class-based discrimination and the ways in which groups are marginalized in society on other dimensions of social identity—such as non-White immigrants and racial minorities—could provide a catalyst for a shift in political behavior (Cortland et al., 2017). Research on the consequences of structural (as opposed to merely individualized) conceptions of intergroup relations (O'Brien et al., 2009) suggests one potential avenue in this regard. As described above, the primary difference between Conflict Aware and Class Connected Whites is the former's structural outlook, suggesting that progressivism can be fostered among Working-class Connected Whites by encouraging them to adopt a more structural

outlook on social class and their position within in the hierarchy (Rucker et al., 2019). Consequently, political strategists who regard working-class Whites as solidly in the thrall of right-wing populism may miss the potential for working-class coalitions that cut across racial divides to emerge.

Ultimately, the true test of the arguments about the connections between different types of class-based identities and various sociopolitical attitudes will be their applicability to a new sample. Although the sites for these interviews were selected according to specific criteria, the interviewees were selected in a nonrandom fashion. These data are rich and provide the basis for a coherent theoretical narrative, but future research is essential to assess the degree to which this narrative applies more broadly.

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