Can the Pandemic-Prompted Shift to Remote Work Solve Belongingness Challenges for Lower Social Class Background White-Collar Employees?

Some Preliminary Thoughts

Erica Jaffe Redner

Abstract

Lower social class background college graduates often navigate social belongingness challenges in white-collar workplaces. The pervasiveness of remote work during the pandemic, and the conversations now underway between employers and employees about the proper place of remote work in a post-pandemic world, invite us to consider how less time performing one's job on-site might moderate those challenges. The following paper identifies four perennial belongingness challenges that lower social class background college graduates face in white-collar workplaces, and evaluates the extent to which remote work could be expected to mitigate them.

Sam Martinson is a graduate of an elite U.S. boarding school and a prestigious American university. He grew up in a low-income household.

Reflecting on his pre-pandemic experience of social belonging at

his Fortune 500 company, Sam[1] lamented that his colleagues' engagement in expensive leisure activities limited his ability to experience connection with them:

> "They … talk about restaurants … they … go to, chefs … they knew, places they've traveled, … gyms—compar[ing] this cycle instructor versus that cycle instructor … When they're speaking, I think damn, that must cost a lot of money! I can't participate in those conversations, 'cause I don't have those experiences, nor could I afford them. … [O]ne of my co-workers[,] … she was like, "'Oh, you gotta travel more so that way you can talk to us' … [P]eople just presuppose that… because I have this job … I have [the financial] means. … A good portion of my income goes to my mom and helping pay bills."

Sam also explained the dilemma he's experienced in wanting to share his most authentic self with co-workers:

> "[L]ast January … I went to visit my girlfriend. She was studying [abroad] for a year, and that was the first time I've ever paid for a flight by myself. … I was … so proud of myself … but for some people that's just a daily occurrence. For me to talk about the [fact that] I just paid for my first flight—I don't even feel comfortable doing that because my co-workers … can't [relate] … They'll just look at me like, 'It's your first time flying?' And then I'll have to explain … The issue I have is that I find myself in positions where I would have to do more explaining than participating."

When prompted to consider whether general sharing about that travel experience might satisfy his authentic self-expression needs, he responded that in leaving out the detail that this is a first for him, the most paramount aspect of his excitement is lost. It's "something that I do want to share … but can't talk about," he concluded. "[My employer] bills itself as a company that you can bring your authentic self to, that's literally what they say—we want you to bring your authentic self. … [B]ut bringing my authentic self has disadvantages for me".

Sam is not alone. Interviews that I conducted in 2019 and 2020[2] with over a hundred lower social class background alumni of highly selective East Coast universities[3] (ranging in age from their early 20s to

---

[1] Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to protect the privacy of my informants.

[2] The interview questions focused on their pre-pandemic experiences at workplaces, and did not capture sentiments about or experiences with remote work.

[3] I define lower social class background individuals, in keeping with its usage in such works as Gray and Kish-Gephart 2013 (cited below), as those people whose parents both lacked 4-year college degrees during the former's upbringing. (Note: They equally qualify as low SES background and first-generation college graduates.) I go one step further in drawing only on interviewees whose parents

early 50s, with a balanced mix of races and genders) frequently revealed experiences of unease in the white-collar professional worlds into which they'd ascended, often by virtue of (1) the different lifestyles and assumptions their colleagues had (which made it hard to connect), (2) differences in the levels of formality and discretion to which their co-workers adhered (for instance, emphasizing positive developments in their lives, while staying mum about negative ones), (3) exposures of class background differences (ex. through questions posed in meetings) that could produce feelings of otherness or self-doubt, and (4) direct comments made by colleagues that denigrated people from lower social class backgrounds, shaking whatever sense of safety and belonging employees from this demographic had previously felt.

The unprecedented extent to which remote work—by necessity—has been practiced and embraced during the pandemic, and the conversations now underway between employers and employees about the role remote work should continue to play in a post-pandemic world, invite us to consider how less time performing one's job on-site might moderate the social belongingness challenges that many lower social class background employees experience. While remote work is typically linked with weaker relationships between colleagues and higher turnover[4] rates, it's possible that lower social class background workers may be better insulated from experiences of class-based exclusion when their proximity to co-workers is reduced by a hybrid or fully remote work arrangement.

In exploring the relationship between remote work and belongingness for lower social class background employees, the following paper (1) reviews and highlights key findings from management and psychology literatures on the phenomena of social belonging, self-disclosure, and how these pertain to demographically dissimilar (or minority) employees; (2) identifies and frames four salient social belongingness challenges that lower social class background white-collar workers experience; and (3) offers predictions about the effectiveness of remote work arrangements writ large for improving the conditions of these workers on an ongoing basis.

I ultimately suggest that, on balance, lower social class background employees are unlikely to be any better off on the social

---

also did not hold jobs generally requiring a college degree during my informants' childhood or adolescent years. I distinguish some of these lower social class background informants throughout the paper with an even finer-grained "low-income background" title based on their eligibility for free or subsidized school lunches when they were growing up, project housing arrangements, and/or by their family's below poverty line income throughout their childhood and adolescence.

[4] Cappelli, P. 2021. *The Future of the Office: Work from Home, Remote Work, and the Hard Choices We All Face.* Philadelphia: Wharton School Press, pp. 5, 20-21, 32.

belongingness front when prompted to do more of their work remotely. While some reduced physical proximity may be a short-term source of comfort for this demographic, it neither addresses the underlying problems that complicate belongingness for these individuals, nor does it resolve their long-term needs for closeness with, rather than relative isolation from, work colleagues. This conclusion has implications not only for the demographic under consideration here, but for the project writ large of weighing the benefits virtual work offers and the threats it may pose. Sensitivity training programs are subsequently proposed as a promising means of optimizing my demographic's experience of social belongingness in the professional realm.

Background

In their 2013 paper, Dumas, Phillips, and Rothbard framed the standing belief that relational closeness could be best induced by sharing personal information. In applying this to workplace relationships, the assumption was that closeness could be fostered through such self-disclosure activities as discussing nonwork personal matters with colleagues or attending social events organized by one's employer, potentially with family members in tow. There's consensus that participation in the latter can provide co-workers with new information about each other—even in the absence of direct self-closure—since they "take employees out of their regular routines and interaction patterns, allowing them to see each other differently", and may additionally invite "emotions … [and] artifacts … commonly reserved for the non-work domain … into the workplace".[5]

Dumas et al. further observed that "demographic diversity … is often associated with relational challenges[,] including lower cohesion", and that the diversity research to date supported the idea that "increased contact, information exchange, and personal interaction" could facilitate greater closeness for demographically dissimilar co-workers.[6] Yet in testing this prediction with racially dissimilar employees, their study found that participation in company-organized social events and self-disclosure exercises failed to generate greater connection between demographically dissimilar employees.[7]

They conclude that encouraging demographically dissimilar employees to share about nonwork aspects of their lives—and to engage

---

[5] Dumas, T.L., Phillips, K.W., and Rothbard, N.P. 2013 'Getting Closer at the Company Party: Integration Experiences, Racial Dissimilarity, and Workplace Relationships' *Organization Science* 24(5): 1377, 1379. See also Stephens J.P., Heaphy E., Dutton J.E. 2011 'High Quality Connections.' In K.S. Cameron and G.M. Spreitzer (eds.) *The Oxford Handbook of Positive Organizational Scholarship*, pp. 385-399. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

[6] Dumas et al. 2013: 1377-1378.

[7] Dumas et al. 2013: 1377.

in outings organized by their employer—may fail to yield the kinds of bonding and belonging envisioned by that employer, as "perceived similarity" moderates the effectiveness of mutual self-disclosure in producing cohesion. Socioemotional closeness is ultimately a product of reciprocal sharing, combined with mutual "validation of personal values, preferences, and beliefs"[8], and demographically dissimilar coworkers who are encouraged to self-disclose will tend to feel "concerned with how others will react to learning more personal information about them".[9] They can experience an even deeper sense of dissimilarity following self-disclosures, resulting in greater interpersonal distance.[10]

Social class background constitutes one type of demographic dissimilarity. In their 2015 article assessing the relationship between CEOs' social class backgrounds and risk-taking behavior, Kish-Gephart and Campbell assert that individuals with lower social class backgrounds "carry with them the burden of a stigmatized identity" as well as attendant "anxiety and fear of being perceived according to the[ir] [class] stereotype".[11] This goes hand-in-hand with the concerns demographically diverse people may have about others' reactions to their self-disclosures, and the deepened sense of dissimilarity such disclosures can produce.

Sam's dilemma about sharing his excitement over purchasing his first plane ticket for fear of his co-workers' reactions and the ways it could deepen his sense of distance from them illustrates the danger self-disclosure by lower social class background individuals can pose to what fragile experience of belonging they possess. As if that weren't enough,

[8] Pillemer J. and Rothbard, N.P. 2018 'Friends Without Benefits: Understanding the Dark Sides of Workplace Friendship' *Academy of Management Review* 43(4): 638. See also Ensari, N., and Miller, N. 2002 'The Out-Group Must Not Be So Bad After All: The Effects of Disclosure, Typicality, and Salience on Intergroup Bias' *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 83: 313-329.

[9] Dumas et al. 2013: 1393, and Pillemer & Rothbard 2018: 638. Also see Liao, H., Chuang, A., and Joshi, A. 2008 'Perceived Deep-Level Dissimilarity: Personality Antecedents and Impact on Overall Job Attitude, Helping, Work Withdrawal, and Turnover' *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 106: 106-124; Hewlin P.F. 2003 'And the Award for Best
Actor Goes to … : Facades of Conformity in Organizational settings' *Academy of Management Review* 28: 633-656; Hewlin P.F. 2009 'Wearing the cloak: Antecedents and Consequences of Creating Facades of Conformity' *Journal of Applied Psychology* 94: 727-74; Phillips, K., Rothbard, N., and Dumas, T. 2009 'To Disclose or Not to Disclose? Status Distance and Self-Disclosure in Diverse Environments' *Academy of Management Review* 34: 710-732; and Roberts L.M. 2005 'Changing faces: Professional Image Construction in Diverse Organizational Settings' *Academy of Management Review* 30: 685-711.

[10] Dumas et al. 2013: 1393 and Pillemer & Rothbard 2018: 638. Also see Liao et al. 2008 and Phillips, K.W. and Loyd, D.L. 2006 'When Surface and Deep-Level Diversity Collide: The Effects on Dissenting Group Members' *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes* 99: 143-160.

[11] Kish-Gephart, J.J. and Campbell, J.T. 2015 'You Don't Forget Your Roots: The Influence of CEO Social Class Background on Strategic Risk Taking,' *Academy of Management Journal* 58(6): 1620.

one may additionally fear that such disclosures could jeopardize one's prospects of professional advancement within one's organization. Sam worried, for instance, that sharing his excitement about his first air ticket purchase could make people on his team "more reticent to talk to me, because they wouldn't want to be … politically incorrect [or] … step on toes." It could create "a wall", Sam feared, that would preclude him from "mak[ing] the bonds that [would] allow … my co-workers to write me the type of recommendations" given peers who share similar outlooks, assumptions, and experiences. "[T]here are some people [who] get left behind," Sam concluded, "and that's the disparate impact … my [class background has on] my condition".

An encounter in Maria Romero's first year at a different Fortune 500 company sparked a fear that others would negatively judge her based on her class background, leading her to actively conceal details about her personal life during her decade-plus tenure there. Maria elaborated:

> "Working there, I never felt like I fit in, ever. They were great, … [but] we were never able to relate on a personal level. Everything was really professional. [M]y first year there, one of [my colleagues] … talked about a community service event [the company had sponsored]. … [H]e talked about how he had to … do a service project in an elderly living facility … and he said it was the most disgusting, awful place he had ever been to; he couldn't believe people lived that way, he had to go into the projects, and I remember I asked him, where was it? And he said it was the towers which were in [the neighborhood where I grew up]. So he was talking about my   neighborhood, talked about how awful the residents were in this tower, … that's when I [told myself], 'Okay, our lives are just completely different.' I completely shut down, I never shared anything personal about my life with anybody, and I was there for [10+] years. … That's when I just said … this is all work and that's how I'm going to do it. … [I] said to myself, … I have this great opportunity, I'm getting paid a lot of money, … just be quiet …, because you're never going to get this opportunity again."

While neither Sam nor Maria experienced a totalizing sense of organizational alienation or disbelonging, their class backgrounds were an ongoing barrier to establishing closer relations with co-workers. By contrast, Kim Hawkins' experience at a high-end private firm exemplifies the potential for creating a deep sense of belonging not through personal life disclosures, but by way of shared work-related passions and personal traits. These phenomena moderated, and helped Kim transcend, the class-based demographic dissimilarity that all too frequently complicates an individual's ability to cultivate close bonds with colleagues.

Kim explained that while she grew up in a low-income household,

she felt "very similar" to her co-workers—people who now occupy her "lifelong friend category"—"based on personality type." "It was such a work hard play hard [culture]," Kim observed of her organization. "Some people … refer[red] to us" (her firm) "as … a cult, because we were … all workaholics. … [I]f you take any two people [from that firm], you will find [them] very, very driven, ambitious, … rebellious, clever … the kind of people who generally won't take no for an answer". They were united by an achievement orientation; by a passion for defying established norms that was channeled time and time again to outwit and triumph over corporate competitors; and by a shared, euphoric like sense of gratification each time their efforts landed them a victory. Her strong sense of belonging wasn't tempered by differences in her—versus her colleagues'—high-end lifestyles, and she felt no need to disclose about her low-income background—or the ways in which it shaped her present thoughts and feelings—to be known by her peers. Her identity and worth were grounded in her ability to help her team "win" on an ongoing basis. Without question, Kim asserted, "these people [were] my tribe."

Remote Work and Social Belonging

Kim's story valuably demonstrates that, in some instances, lower social class background individuals can establish meaningful camaraderie and belongingness with co-workers through shared similarities that transcend their demographic differences. Yet in finding grounds for developing such strong connections, and failing to experience any memorable moments of class-based discrimination, discomfort, or social derailments at her job, Kim's story was exceptional. The belongingness-related challenges echoed in so many of my informants' tales, together with the unprecedented rise of remote work in the current moment, invite us to consider whether off-site work arrangements might improve the day-to-day experiences of lower social class background white-collar workers. The scope of my interviews is not conducive to evaluating this comparatively within a given industry or particular job type, but does lend itself to analysis across industry and job types via four belongingness-related problems that were consistently raised in my interviews. Each one will now be explored in turn.

Exposure of Class Background Differences

The first belongingness-related challenge we'll consider is the exposure of class background differences. Kevin Bassett's story illustrates that this can be problematic even when one's own class background isn't exposed; simply learning that the bulk of one's peers have a very different class background from one's own can foment self-doubt and lead one to question one's belonging in his/her/their chosen professional environment.

While completing his medical training, Kevin and 150+ of his colleagues were asked in their first meeting together to stand up if one of their parents was also a doctor. Kevin was astounded to see all but 3 of his other colleagues rise. The stark difference between his background (low-income, no doctors in his family) and those of his peers ignited his nerves: "How much does someone like me belong in this place?" he wondered. "Do I have any context for this at all?"

This invites us to consider whether a remote alternative would've significantly reduced the likelihood that this class background difference exposure would materialize. Given that the query posed to Kevin and his colleagues could've been offered—and answered—just as easily in an online meeting, it's reasonable to conclude that a remote work arrangement in and of itself would not prevent the occurrence of this type of belongingness-related challenge. While the absence of physical proximity may ensure that an individual distressed by such information can process it in a more comfortable setting, a remote context nonetheless fails to substantively resolve the underlying challenge of receiving this question and having class background differences that distinguish oneself from others revealed.

Tolerating and Adhering to Certain Perceived White-Collar Norms of Formality and Discretion

The second belongingness-related challenge we'll explore is tolerating and adhering to certain perceived white-collar norms of formality and discretion. Michael Donato has intentionally passed over higher-end jobs in his field that require "suit and tie" formality, and that tend to attract—from his standpoint—the most inauthentic or superficial representatives of the white-collar bunch. "I really hate getting the Christmas card that's a page long [and] tells me all of the wonderful things that happen to people over the course of a year," Michael explained. "In most people's lives, there are a whole bunch of …. good things that didn't happen during that time." The types who send carefully curated Christmas cards, Michael asserted, are exactly the kinds of people he tries to avoid in his personal and professional life. And in a high-end professional environment, Michael contended, the probability is greater that "when you sit down and have a conversation with somebody … all you [will] get is happy horseshit … about their family and their lives … how little Johnny is doing great and little Sally is … fantastic", etc. "Those people bother me," he concluded. "They're just not real."

To limit his exposure to these people and to the more formal and inauthentic ways he feels he would be pressured to present himself in their company, he's limited the scope of the employment opportunities he'll consider. Might a remote work arrangement widen the range of his work possibilities—and those of others who make similar choices—by

insulating them from exposure to (and from pressures to comply with) more airbrushed modes of presentation?

While remote work arrangements should take the edge off of this belongingness-related challenge (insofar as lower social class background individuals would enjoy a little personal distance from co-workers via the muted proximity and the possibility of a more casual dress code off-site), it is unlikely, on balance, that this problem could be substantially resolved by a work from home model. In the first place, remote work shouldn't make much of a difference if one already had the option of an in-person job at a higher-end organization that didn't require much interaction or teamwork with co-workers. If, on the other hand, one's role in a higher-end organization would require a good deal of interaction or teamwork, that would almost certainly continue over a virtual platform in the remote model. Next, given the higher turnover rates that generally accompany remote work[12], and the average employee's tendency to seek out connection—rather than isolation—in their professional life[13], it will be in companies' best interests to provide their remote employees with plentiful opportunities for virtual socialization (in the form of meetings that include some icebreakers or informal small talk in breakout rooms, online happy hours, etc). Ultimately, it's likely that this contact (albeit virtual) would simply extend the alienation experienced by individuals who struggle to tolerate and adhere to white-collar formality and discretion in office environments, as (1) the conflicting values that grate against each other (about how to be in the world, or how different people want to be known, etc.) will not be reconciled by the mere shift from an on-site to an off-site mode, and (2) the "'pervasive drive [of individuals—here lower social class background ones particularly] to form and maintain … lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal [relationships]'" in the work domain given "the sheer number of hours that … individuals spend [there]" will go unmet.

Navigating Differences in Interests, Lifestyles, and Orientations that Align with Class Background

The third belongingness-related challenge is a variation on our prior theme. For some lower social class background white-collar workers, the struggle lies not in tolerating or adhering to certain kinds of formality and discretion norms that may dominate higher-end professional environments, but in navigating differences in day-to-day interests,

---

[12] Cappelli 2021: 21, 32.

[13] Ashforth, B.E., Sluss, D.M., and Harrison, S.H. 2007 'Socialization in Organizational Contexts,' International Review of *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* 22: 38. See also Baumeister, R. F. and Leary, M. R. 1995 'The Need to Belong: Desire for Interpersonal Attachments as a Fundamental Human Motivation' *Psychological Bulletin* 117(3): 497–529.

lifestyles, recreational pursuits, underlying assumptions, and attendant expectations that align with class background and pose barriers to affinity-based bonding.

Sam's story illuminated lifestyle and recreational pursuit differences (vis-à-vis restaurants and gyms frequented by his co-workers that were foreign to him), as well as expectations on the part of his co-workers that a peer like Sam could (and should) engage in more of these activities (cycling at different gyms, as well as scaling up his travel, etc). Sam's more limited means, as well as his expressed disinterest in adopting this type of lifestyle and its attendant recreational activities, would ensure a status quo on these fronts. Sam acknowledged that he has a leg up on many lower social class background counterparts because his educational experience afforded him second-hand knowledge (via classmates) about the kinds of "high class" recreational activities affluent people in his East Coast locale tend to partake in, like "sipping mimosas at Martha's Vineyard." Nonetheless, he neither has engaged in, nor aspires to engage in, such experiences. The question, then, is whether remote work could improve the quality of Sam's (and other lower social class background employees') professional lives by reducing some of the affinity-based disconnection they face.

A virtual setting could buffer these individuals from encountering friendship groups with which they wish to experience belonging, but do not. This could improve their professional experience, insofar as psychological research suggests that "awareness of others' friendships can be detrimental to outsiders ... breed[ing] a ... sense of exclusion[,] [a] lack of connection to other employees", and rejection.[14] But the insulation provided by virtual work on this front may be countered by the socialization opportunities discussed previously that smart companies will provide to strengthen the relational connectedness of their general employee population and mitigate turnover.

On balance, a remote work arrangement is unlikely to improve the professional experience of employees facing affinity-based disconnection because it does nothing to help them find new and better ways of developing closer relationships with their colleagues. Sam, for instance, covets the close relationships people make at his company. He observed that "A lot of people make [close] friendships at [my workplace] ... [there] is a really big emphasis on people ... socializing at [my company] ... because it ... [supports] new ways of thinking ... and can strengthen teams." He'd like that for himself, and wishes there were a way to reveal his true self that would result in colleagues embracing—rather than potentially distancing—from him on that basis. While the desire for belongingness and closeness with co-workers exists along a spectrum, Ashforth, Sluss, and Harrison suggest in their 2007 article that some

---

[14] Pillemer & Rothbard 2018: 645.

general yearning for connection with one's co-workers (no matter what one's demographic background might be) is more or less universal.[15] Remote work does nothing to resolve this challenge.

Direct Comments Denigrating Lower Social Class Background People

The final belongingness-related challenge we'll examine is the experience of direct comments denigrating people from lower social class backgrounds, which can undermine the latter's sense of safety and belonging. This type of experience was illustrated in Maria's story, motivating her to conceal her class origins. Kevin also found himself confronted with peers in his medical training who, in debating the merits of universal healthcare for their patients, made such comments as "I just don't understand why … lazy poor people should get free healthcare that's paid for by my [family's] taxes", oblivious to the fact that Kevin himself had grown up on Medicaid. In yet another instance of class-based denigration, Ryan Fitzgerald watched as his colleagues poked fun at working-class people from the neighboring town where he'd grown up. They imitated his neighbors' cigarette smoking, their accent, and their posture. Ryan asked them to desist from making these caricatures, informing them that they were denigrating his childhood neighbors. When they failed to honor his request, he quit.

Would a virtual work arrangement have prevented these class-based denigrations? Because these infractions are attributable to a general lack of sensitivity, it's safe to conclude that class-based jokes and class-based discrimination could be aired just as casually in a (non-recorded) virtual happy hour sponsored by an employer as an on-site workplace. While it may be more comfortable to process such denigrations off-site, a virtual work arrangement would do nothing to address the underlying classism that lies at the heart of this problem.

Table 1: Summary of belongingness-related challenges and the extent to which remote work could be expected to mitigate them.

Belongingness-related challenges:	Pros of remote work:	Limitations of remote work:
Exposure of class background differences	-An individual distressed by such an exposure might be able to more comfortably process it in his/her/their remote location than	-A remote work arrangement in and of itself is unlikely to mitigate such exposures, which could materialize just as easily online as they would in-person.

---

[15] Ashforth et al. 2007: 38. See also Baumeister & Leary 1995: 497-529.

	in an office setting.	
Tolerating and adhering to certain perceived white-collar norms of formality and discretion	-Virtual work could take the edge off of this challenge by offering greater physical distance from co-workers and the possibility of a more casual dress code.	-A remote work arrangement in and of itself is unlikely to resolve the overall need to tolerate and adhere to certain perceived white-collar norms of formality and discretion when interacting with professional colleagues. Work-related meetings and social events that require white-collar norm tolerance and adherence in in-person settings are apt to be replicated virtually.
Navigating differences in interests, lifestyles, recreational pursuits, assumptions, and expectations that align with class background	-Virtual work could buffer lower social class individuals from the pain of encountering friendship groups day-to-day that they struggle to integrate into based on their lifestyle and expectation-related differences.	-A remote work arrangement in and of itself is unlikely to resolve the overall challenge of affinity-based disconnection because it does nothing to help employees find new and better ways to develop closer relationships with colleagues from different backgrounds.
Direct comments denigrating lower social class background people	-An individual distressed by such a denigration might find it more comfortable to process off-site.	-A remote work arrangement in and of itself would do nothing to address classism, which lies at the heart of this problem and could be aired virtually almost as easily as in person.

The Benefits of Sensitivity Training

In consistently predicting that virtual work arrangements would be an ineffective means of treating the underlying challenges identified here that limit belongingness prospects for lower social class background white-collar workers, the utility of sensitivity training as a way to improve the latter's social experience emerges.

Much evidence suggests that upwardly mobile individuals struggle to obtain acceptance from higher social class background co-workers they encounter on this path. Gray and Kish-Gephart observe that "individuals readily assess others' social class" and "assign differential competence to [them] based on such judgments … regardless of [their] …

task performance at work."[16] Sensitivity training could improve employees' awareness of these biases, of classist beliefs more generally that they may air (misguidedly perceiving of them as innocent recollections or opinions, as Maria's colleague likely did), and of how these statements unknowingly affect surrounding co-workers with perceptible or imperceptible lower social class backgrounds.

Such training might have prepared Maria's co-worker to exercise greater discretion in sharing about his experience volunteering in the neighborhood where Maria had (unbeknownst to him) grown up. It could also help Sam's co-workers better understand that he may not be in a position to participate in their expensive leisure activities (even though his job and income may be comparable to theirs), and afford them the tools to respond with openness, warmth, and curiosity to self-disclosures on his part that expose differences in their outlooks and lived experiences. These tools might include best practice questions to pose in such instances, and information to listen for that might help both parties better discern subtle similarities that unite them. Such improvements could make all the difference given the complementary realities that "those who are dissimilar from their coworkers are often [most] concerned with how others will react to learning more personal information about them", and that "when people encounter different perspectives or behaviors in the course of interacting with someone who is demographically dissimilar, the response to those differences will determine the quality of the relationship moving forward".[17]

Relatedly, an optimal sensitivity training should help employees understand how they might establish closeness with demographically dissimilar others through shared work goals and personality traits (as Kim did), even when their surface interests and experiences are different. It might also orient them to better appreciate what these colleagues bring to the organization; research has shown that "where individuals are respected for the knowledge, background, and insights they can provide, workplace relationships are … improved."[18] Successful implementation of these skills and values should ease the pressure for individuals to conceal their lower social class backgrounds and attendant values and perspectives (a tendency that's otherwise known to take a "high

---

[16] Gray, B., and Kish-Gephart, J.J. 2013 'Encountering Social Class Differences at Work: How 'Class Work' Perpetuates Inequality' *Academy of Management Review* 38(4): 671, 673.

[17] Dumas et al. 2013: 1393-1394. Also see Hewlin 2003: 633-656; Hewlin 2009: 727-74; Phillips et al. 2009: 710-732; Roberts 2005: 685-711; and Davidson M.N. and James E.H. 2007. 'The Engines of Positive Relationships Across Difference: Conflict and Learning' In J.E. Dutton and B.R. Ragins (eds.) *Exploring Positive Relationships at Work: Building a Theoretical Research Foundation* pp. 137-158. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[18] Dumas et al. 2013: 1394.

emotional and cognitive toll" and to "create a sense of alienation")[19], as well as help ensure that their input and ideas (of special strategic value to organizations, given the unique insights people from this demographic possess) will be readily voiced and given all due consideration by co-workers.[20]

Sensitivity training (together with policies that incentivize the voicing of related grievances and that ensure enforcement of the anti-discrimination principles that guide the trainings) should address all four of the belongingness-related challenges explored in this article. By raising people's awareness of the classist biases they hold and the classist statements they may make, occurrences of class-based denigration should have the best possible chance of receding. Best practice tools for responding to a colleague's self-disclosure that reveals strong class-based dissimilarities should improve each party's ability to ultimately find common ground together and to feel sufficiently safe and comfortable in the face of those divulgences. Gaining a greater appreciation of the general discomfort lower social class background individuals may experience when class backgrounds are exposed in professional settings should also motivate leaders to consider how their actions (including posed questions) could produce such an outcome, and to limit these events whenever possible. Finally, by helping lower social class background individuals and their higher social class background counterparts understand why each tends to get socialized with stark formality and discretion differences, greater comfort with and appreciation for the others' behavior may ensue, leading the former to consider additional job opportunities and both parties to engage in warmer workplace relationships together. The promise of sensitivity training writ large is that it can improve the discrete interactions people with different class backgrounds have together, and as Gray and Kish-Gephart observe, "those who regularly (and successfully) interact with others across a wide variety of social classes" increasingly become less likely "to notice cross-class differences", and are more inclined to "positively assess their interaction partner."[21]

---

[19] Kish-Gephart and Campbell 2015: 1620, and Cable D.M., Gino F., and Staats B.R. 2013 'Breaking Them In or Eliciting Their Best? Reframing Socialization Around Newcomers' Authentic Self-Expression' Administrative Science Quarterly 58: 6-7.

[20] See, for instance, Lubrano, A. 2004. *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley and Sons, pp. 158-159 for one example of the added value a lower social class background individual can bring to an organization through his/her/their unique perspective and ideas. Also see Nemeth, C.J., and Staw, B.M. 1989. 'The Tradeoffs of Social Control and Innovation in Groups and Organizations' *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 22: 175-210 for an analysis of the costs of uniformity in group decision-making that can be mitigated when unique insights from individuals with diverse perspectives can be comfortably voiced and given due consideration.

[21] Gray and Kish-Gephart 2013: 684.

Concluding Remarks

This paper identified four belongingness-related challenges that lower social class background individuals experience in the white-collar professional realm, and evaluated the extent to which remote work could insulate them from these problems. While I ultimately predict that a virtual arrangement wouldn't substantially improve this demographic's belongingness situation, sensitivity training emerges as a promising alternative to pursue in creating a better professional experience for these workers.

Given the theoretical nature of this paper, an empirical study examining the remote work experiences of lower social class background white-collar workers (with attention to its impact on one's sense of alienation and belonging, and a test of the predictions set forth here) could valuably extend and refine this article's conclusions. Future research exploring the connection between virtual work and social belongingness should consider its efficacy under short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons; test across and within particular industries and job type categories (ex. university employees writ large versus university administrators specifically); explore how one's tendency toward introversion (versus extraversion) might change the calculus of virtual work's utility for particular lower social class background employees; assess social belongingness experiences with standardized indicators that lend themselves to clean comparative analysis (rather than relying exclusively on freeform self-reports that may yield only apples-to-oranges comparisons); and, as possible, evaluate how lower social class background workers performing jobs *on-site* for employers that *provide sensitivity training* fare on the belongingness front as compared to counterparts in *virtual work arrangements* with companies that *provide*— and also with ones that *do not provide—sensitivity trainings* to their staffs. Evaluating sensitivity trainings proper and how they might be constructed to most effectively respond to the belongingness challenges of lower social class background white-collar workers would constitute another vital extension of this theoretical piece.

Erica Jaffe Redner is a PhD candidate in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. Her interdisciplinary research straddles the fields of anthropology and management. She's served as a teaching fellow for courses in anthropology in her home department and in organizational behavior at the Wharton School and at Northwestern's Kellogg School of Management. Her dissertation examines the employment outcomes of first-generation college graduates and their experiences navigating white-collar labor markets and workplaces.