SOCIAL CLASS TRANSITIONERS: THEIR CULTURAL ABILITIES
AND ORGANIZATIONAL IMPORTANCE

SEAN R. MARTIN
University of Virginia

STÉPHANE CÔTÉ
University of Toronto

We present a theoretical framework describing the experiences and cultural abilities of social class transitioners—those who have moved from one social class to another—in organizations. Evidence suggests that many people transition from one social class to another over their lifetime, and we do not have a framework for understanding how transitioners experience the workplace or affect their organizations. This omission is consequential because social class is a permeable and intersectional form of diversity, and those who have transitioned between social classes might accumulate cultural tools from different class contexts, making them particularly well suited to understanding and bridging class-based cultural differences within groups. We argue that the range of one’s cultural understanding depends on the class distance one has traveled, the time spent in each class position, and the direction of the transition. We then articulate strategies that transitioners can use to deploy their cultural skills, the factors influencing which strategies they select, and how each strategy involves trade-offs between individual and group outcomes. We conclude by discussing the contributions of this work to the literature on social class and diversity, on culture, and on groups and teams and by suggesting future research directions.

People love “rags to riches” stories. In his autobiography, Benjamin Franklin tells of being born to poverty and literally turning rags into riches in the Pennsylvania paper industry through buying old rags and turning them into the paper that he sold. Franklin went from the bottom of the social ladder to the top, becoming a statesperson and inventor who was renowned for his ability to connect with people from all walks of life (Franklin, 2012). Although there is anecdotal evidence of people who, like Franklin, have transitioned across the social class spectrum and are able to connect with and relate to people from diverse backgrounds, we do not have a theoretical framework for understanding how people who transition between social classes during their lives relate to others, experience the workplace, or affect their groups, teams, or organizations.

This omission is notable, because while rates of relative economic mobility are declining (Chetty et al., 2017), the absolute rate of mobility is still fairly high, and many people are moving up and down the socioeconomic ladder (Jantti & Jenkins, 2015; Piketty, 2000). Available evidence suggests nontrivial probabilities of social mobility for those at both the top and bottom of the income distribution (Torche, 2017). Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics reveal that more than half (56 percent) of individuals born into the bottom quintile of family income move up at least one quintile, and more than a third (34 percent) move up at least two quintiles by the time they reach adulthood. Further, of those born into the top quintile, more than half (53 percent) move down at least one quintile, and more than a quarter (28 percent) move down at least two quintiles from birth to adulthood (Bengali & Daly, 2013). These conclusions are consistent with data from the U.S. Treasury showing that from 1987 to 2010 close to half of taxpayers moved up or down by at least one income quintile in the United States (Auten, Gee, & Turner, 2013). Data from Chetty, Hendren, Kline, and Saez (2014) show that, at the extremes of upward mobility, 7.5 percent of U.S. children born in the bottom quintile of wealth transition to the top quintile as adults, and the percentages are even higher in other countries (13 percent and 11 percent in Canada and Denmark, for instance).

We would like to thank the associate editor and three developmental reviewers for their guidance and stewardship of this manuscript. We also thank Jean Bartunek, Oscar Holmes IV, and Sonia Kang for their valuable feedback on earlier versions of this work.
Thus, many people are on the move, yet we do not understand what value and skills these people may bring to organizations.

Here we propose a theoretical framework for understanding class transitioners’ experiences and their potential value in organizations. Social class reflects a person’s position of relative advantage or disadvantage compared to others along multiple factors, including income, education, and occupation (Adler & Snibbe, 2003; Côté, 2011). Income reflects access to material resources, education reflects access to specific cultural knowledge and social connections to privileged networks, and occupation signifies respect and prestige in society (Kraus & Stephens, 2012; Snibbe & Markus, 2005). We define class transitioners as those who have moved upward or downward across the social class spectrum. We consider the size of class transitions to be the class distance that people have traveled from their social class origins, or the class of their parents or guardians while they were children. We draw on flexible conceptualizations of culture (Giorgi, Lockwood, & Glynn, 2015) as a toolkit to argue that class transitioners gain insights and abilities as a result of moving up or down the social class spectrum, and these make them particularly well suited to bridge cultural differences within groups. We further articulate strategies class transitioners can use to deploy these tools, why they select some strategies over others, and the effects of each strategy on themselves and their groups. Our proposed model is presented in Figure 1.

Our theorizing contributes to research on social class, cultural diversity, and groups and teams. Extant research largely treats social class as static. Some scholars have described the effects of social class origins on executives’ strategic decision making (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015), leaders’ behaviors toward others (Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016), or individuals’ tendencies to emerge as leaders (Barling & Weatherhead, 2016). Others have described the effects of current class position on individuals’ prosociality (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010) and moral reasoning (Côté, Piff, & Willer, 2013), and have explored how class differences can result in tension or conflict between class groups (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013; Meuris & Leana, 2015). Our framework posits a dynamic perspective on class,

FIGURE 1
A Model of Social Class Toolkit Development, Deployment Strategies, and Outcomes

Note: Gray shading indicates relationships for which we do not build formal propositions.
arguing that transitioners are different from those in any singular class position because they acquire useful resources as a result of their transitions, and those resources have implications for them and their groups.

In addition, the cultural lens that has been used to interpret social class constrains behavior (Schein, 1996). Seen through this lens, class is an environment that socializes inhabitants, with different classes instilling different behavioral norms, values, and perspectives (Bourdieu, 1994; Côté, 2011; Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012). In this interpretation, these differences cause cross-class tensions (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013) that are not readily assuaged. By contrast, a toolkit perspective envisions culture as a collection of resources that, rather than constraining, can be used strategically and flexibly by culturally savvy people to appeal to different groups and to accomplish goals (Giorgi et al., 2015; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Swidler, 1986). For instance, prior research has described how cultural tools can be used to influence others (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Also, group members who share a toolkit innovate better (Seidel & O’Mahony, 2014). Further, people can acquire tools from multiple cultural groups to meet their needs (Clemens & Cook, 1999; Sewell, 1992).

Less attention, though, has been paid to the factors leading people to acquire a rich complement of cultural tools and adeptness in using them. Unsettled times can prompt changes in people’s toolkits (Swidler, 1986, 2001), and a wider range of tools enables people to facilitate a wider range of outcomes (Small, Harding, & Lamont, 2010). We therefore argue that social class transitioners, having been unsettled in their class positions and exposed to different cultural registers, are particularly likely to develop broad cultural toolkits that they can use in various ways to relate to a broad range of people. We suggest that the development of an expanded cultural toolkit and the way that it is used is related to the breadth of one’s cultural experiences, the time in one’s life that a transition occurred, and the trajectory of the transition.

Finally, we contribute to research on diversity in groups and teams. Social class differences connote divergence in values and perspectives, suggesting that class differences likely create deep-level diversity in teams that can hinder effective functioning (Harrison, Price, Gavin, & Florey, 2002). Class is also a “key cross-cutting category, which is intertwined with all other forms of difference” (Jansen, Tatli, Özbilgin, & Bell, 2013: 277), suggesting that social class diversity is likely to correspond to group faultlines (divisions across multiple categories) that are particularly damaging to team processes (Jehn & Bezrukova, 2010; Thatcher & Patel, 2012). Much of the research on diversity in groups advocates solving these issues or promoting inclusion via structural solutions (see van Dijk, Meyer, van Engen, & Loyd, 2017), but very few studies have addressed how individual group members might engage in behaviors to alleviate the negative aspects of diversity and promote inclusion (Guillaume, Dawson, Otaye-Ebede, Woods, & West, 2017). Here we suggest that class transitioners may be able to span categories of multiple types by connecting on shared experiences, values, norms, and perspectives. Doing so facilitates the flow of information among diverse group members and increases perspective taking about why differences exist.

In what follows we briefly review research concerning social class as a cultural influence. We then develop a theory for how social class transitions shape an individual’s toolkit of cultural resources, positing that the extent of one’s cultural understanding is related to the class distance one has traveled, the time one has spent in each class position, and the direction of the transition. We next articulate strategies transitioners may use to deploy their tools and the factors influencing their selection. We argue that transitioners select a strategy for deploying their cultural toolkit by considering the potential value to their groups and the value to themselves as individuals and making a decision about whom to prioritize. We further articulate how the direction of one’s transition influences the tool deployment processes. Finally, we situate our model in the broader diversity literature and connect social class dynamics to research concerning diversity in other important and well-established intersectional categories by noting the roles of race and gender in class transitions. We conclude by discussing our contributions; explaining how this framework distinguishes social class transitions from national, organizational, or occupational transitions; and articulating a future research agenda.

In building our theory, we focus on objective social class experiences and how they shape transitioners’ values and perspectives, rather
than on transitioners’ subjective perceptions of their social class. We choose this focus for the following reasons. First, theory and evidence converge to suggest that many people identify as “middle-class” (Morin & Motel, 2012), regardless of their objective position. Second, a focus on objective class experiences distinguishes our framework from other theoretical perspectives, like those concerning multiple identities or identification during transitions (e.g., Berry, 1997; Fitzsimmons, 2013). People can identify with classes they have not objectively experienced. For example, a person who has grown up in an upper-class neighborhood might view themselves as middle-class and also might appropriate elements of a lower-class environment into their speech or dress. However, people are not able to make effective use of cultural elements they have not directly experienced (Higgins, 1996; Leung, Maddux, Galinsky, & Chiu, 2008; Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). Thus, while an upper-class person may identify as middle- or lower-class in some ways, they have not experienced objective middle- or lower-class environments and will not be able to make effective use of these environments’ cultural tools. We thus focus on objective class experiences because they are more strongly related to the cultural tools one is likely to adopt and use effectively.

SOCIAL CLASS, TRANSITIONS, AND TOOLKITS

Social Class and Class Transitions

One’s social class environment exerts strong socializing pressures (Bourdieu, 1994; Lareau, 2011). Different social class positions can be conceived of as different cultures with unique values, prioritizations, symbols, behavioral patterns, and perspectives (Cohen & Varnum, 2016; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011; Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). These elements represent sets of cultural tools, which are the symbols, behavioral practices, and worldviews existing in different contexts that can be used in various configurations to accomplish goals (Swidler, 1986).

There are observable, surface-level differences in things like perceptions of physical health (Marmot, 2004), clothing (Gillith, Bahns, Ge, & Crandall, 2012), manners (Domhoff, 1998; Kraus & Keltner, 2009), musical preferences (Snibbe & Markus, 2005), and accents (Purnell, Rainy, & Salmons, 2009). These observable differences create social categories that people assign one another into and that, like other social categories, are associated with unique stereotypes. For example, upper-class individuals tend to be perceived as competent but cold, and lower-class individuals tend to be judged as low in both warmth and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Concerning deep-level diversity, people from different social classes prioritize different values (Longest, Hitlin, & Vaisey, 2013; Piff, Stancato, Martinez, Kraus, & Keltner, 2012), have different beliefs about independence versus interdependence (Snibbe & Markus, 2005; Stephens et al., 2007), make different types of moral judgments (Côté et al., 2013), interpret organizational symbols differently (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013), and learn to communicate differently (Bernstein, 1974; Lareau, 2002). For example, starting at a very young age, individuals from higher classes are encouraged to speak their minds and experiment with their behavior, whereas those from lower-class environments internalize that deviating from norms can lead to harsh consequences (Lareau, 2002). These differences are more difficult to see and therefore harder to immediately classify as stemming from differences in class. This is one potential reason that differences in perspectives resulting from class differences may be attributed to other more visible forms of diversity (van Dijk et al., 2017).

While exerting strong socializing pressures, class is also a comparatively permeable type of diversity in that it has “fuzzy” (Zweig, 2004) boundaries that people may pass through at different points in their lives. Yet it is intersectional with other types of diversity that are less permeable. To wit, evidence suggests that minorities and women are more likely to occupy lower social class positions than men and those in ethnic and racial majorities (Institute for Research on Poverty, 2015; U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Comparisons of research findings in both fields indicates that social class has effects similar to those of race and gender on individuals’ perspectives, values, and social tendencies. For example, evidence suggests that women and members of minority groups tend to prioritize values of altruism, benevolence, and social interdependence to a higher degree than do men and those of European descent (Dietz, Kalof, & Stern, 2002; Suizzo, 2007). Converging evidence from social class research suggests that those from lower-class backgrounds also tend to emphasize self-transcendent values more than do those from higher-class backgrounds (Longest et al., 2013; Piff
et al., 2012). These findings highlight the possibility that experiences across the social class spectrum may correspond to having firsthand experiences with the differences in perspectives, values, and social tendencies shared with other less permeable categories of diversity. This permeable and intersectional nature of social class thus makes it useful for developing theory about what types of organizational members may be particularly suited to reach across different categories of diversity to connect on shared experiences, values, and diverse perspectives, and to leverage those commonalities for their own or others’ benefit.

For example, in Figure 2 the upper portion of the figure presents a (nonexhaustive) graphic of some of the significant systematic differences across social classes established by prior research. The lower portion of the figure presents Persons A through E, each of whom has had different class experiences. Person A and Person C have made the smallest class transitions, while Person E has made the largest one. If these people were members of a group, Person A and Person C would likely have very different behavioral norms, adopt different perspectives, and prioritize different values, making them more likely to experience relationship conflict (Harrison & Klein, 2007). Person A and Person B, and Person C and Person D, would be most likely to relate on some shared experiences and perspectives. Person B and Person D would have at least some shared experience and perspective upon which they could relate. Person D would potentially be able to deploy cultural tools pertaining to and demonstrating an understanding of Person B’s and Person C’s class experiences and resulting differences in values, norms, and perspectives. However, Person D may not have the range of tools to effectively relate to Person A and Person C. We argue that the person who is most likely to be capable of understanding and relating to the different norms, values, and experiences of each member of the group and understanding why those differences exist is Person E, who has experienced the largest class transition and, thus, has the most diverse cultural register to draw from.

**FIGURE 2**
Social Class Transitions and Their Relationships to Differences in Norms, Values, Perspectives, and Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social norms</th>
<th>Values</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low social class</td>
<td>Interdependence (prosociality, empathic accuracy, conformity)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High social class</td>
<td>Self-transcendent, conservation values</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Person A
Lower-middle-class origin
Lower-middle-class destination

Person B
Lower-middle-class origin
Middle-class destination

Person C
Upper-class origin
Upper-class destination

Person D
Middle-class origin
Upper-middle-class destination

Person E
Lower-class origin
Upper-class destination
they pay particular attention to those in their new environment, learning what is normative either by interaction or by direct instruction (Bandura & Walters, 1977). For example, students from lower-class backgrounds initially struggle when they enter elite universities, but by learning the norms and expectations of their new contexts, they may come to perform effectively (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). Similarly, wealth managers from lower-class backgrounds are able to go through “habitus training programs,” or otherwise learn the signaling “that takes place at a frequency all but inaudible to everyone except members of the very upper reaches of the socioeconomic spectrum,” including not only how to dress but also how to speak and navigate new and elite social contexts (Harrington, 2016: 96). This aligns with life course socialization research, which shows that while many of one’s deep-level values and perspectives are imprinted early in life, later socialization experiences can facilitate the addition of new, context-specific skills and norms (Ashforth & Saks, 1996; Luthey & Mortimer, 2006).

The cultural toolkit perspective posits that the different values, norms, and perspectives in these new environments represent tools or resources that people can use to accomplish their goals. New tools are acquired during unsettled times (Swidler, 1986, 2001). For example, expatriates who develop knowledge of and skill in deploying the elements of other cultures are better able to integrate with those groups and be effective in diverse settings (Ang et al., 2007; Firth, Chen, Kirkman, & Kim, 2014; Zhu, Wanberg, Harrison, & Diehn, 2016). Entrepreneurs, dealing with frequent ambiguity, can become skilled “cultural operatives” and deploy the right cultural tools to enhance their perceived legitimacy in different groups and acquire resources (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001: 559). We argue that those who transition between social classes are exposed to new cultural tools and adapt by acquiring them in order to become more skilled operatives (Molinsky, 2013).

However, we also expect that people only develop efficacy with the tools of the contexts they have experienced. For instance, even when graduating from good colleges, students from lower-class backgrounds are not completely aware of the cultural symbols best deployed within elite organizations that hire largely upper-class individuals. As such, they may unintentionally deploy cultural symbols of their lower-class experiences that can be held against them or that can be seen as demonstrating low cultural fit (Rivera, 2012). In his book *Hillbilly Elegy*, J. D. Vance (2016) describes transitioning from a low social class childhood in rural Appalachia to a higher-class position as a graduate student at Yale Law School and learning the norms of this new context. But when attending lavish recruiting visits with elite law firms, he did not know how to act in these elite professional settings. This example and the preceding research suggest that transitioners’ cultural toolkits likely grow to encompass—but do not grow beyond—what they have experienced.

Further, groups at the extremes of the class spectrum are particularly distinct (Côté et al., 2017). Thus, the class distance one travels should relate to the expansiveness of the toolkit one develops. In much of the research on other kinds of cultural transitions (e.g., cross-national transitions, mergers and acquisitions), scholars have argued and shown that larger transitions are more difficult to make. As a result, those who enter cultures that are very different from their culture of origin frequently do not adopt many of the cultural tools of their new host culture and may struggle to adjust (Berry, 1997; Graebner, Heimeriks, Huy, & Vaara, 2017). This may be partly due to the categorical nature of the change being made in these kinds of transitions. That is, when one geographically moves to a new culture, the change is sudden—for instance, one was in the United States but now, after a short period of travel, one is in China. Similarly, during a merger, transitions are likely to happen comparatively quickly. For social class, the change is likely more gradual. With exceptions (e.g., winning the lottery or suffering sudden expensive medical emergencies), most people transition social classes in steps. They move up by getting educated over years, saving money where possible, or getting promotions at work. They move down by losing a job, moving to smaller apartments in different parts of town, spending through savings (if they had any), or choosing to sacrifice class position to pursue other ends. As such, social class transitions are often incremental: transitioners pass through various classes and experience them at least temporarily on their way to higher or lower positions. For this reason, and as shown in Figure 1, individuals’ class origins, class destinations, other class positions they have occupied during their lives, and the class distance they have spanned are all important to consider in determining the range of cultural tools they accumulate. We therefore expect
that movement up or down the class spectrum facilitates an incremental accumulation of tools resulting in the expansion of one’s toolkit.

**Proposition 1:** The extent of one’s social class transition is positively related to the expansiveness of one’s cultural toolkit.

**Duration of exposure.** The longer people are in a particular social class position, the more they are prone to adopt that position’s cultural tools into their cultural toolkit. Research suggests that individuals continue to adapt to new cultures the longer they are in them (Zhu et al., 2016). This is because they have more interactions with others in the culture and gain greater facility with its various dimensions until they achieve a mastery level where they are comfortable engaging with and fitting into their new cultural context (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; Kosic, Kruglanski, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2004; Searle & Ward, 1990; Ward, 1996). By contrast, people who do not spend significant time in other cultures are unlikely to experience the full range of cultural nuances and diverse set of cultural tools existing in their environment, and they therefore may struggle to effectively use cultural elements from those contexts (Maddux & Galinsky, 2009). Similarly, organizational socialization research suggests that people can become more socialized into organizations the longer they are members (Ashforth, 2012; Ashforth, Sluss, & Harrison, 2007), because it takes time to learn cultural norms, values, and perspectives and the nuances of how to appropriately use them.

Although there is less research about social class acculturation broadly, existing evidence suggests that the duration of time people spend in a class enhances its effects. The health effects of poverty become more extreme the longer one is exposed to it (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Evans, 2004; Macmillan, McMorris, & Kruttschnitt, 2004). Persistent exposure to poverty relates to a reduced sense of personal mastery (Barling & Weatherhead, 2016). Likewise, when a family moves to a better neighborhood, each additional year spent there improves a child’s potential long-term outcomes, suggesting that the amount of time spent in a higher-class environment influences experiences and outcomes (Chetty & Hendren, 2016).

Collectively, the evidence indicates that the longer people spend in a social class context, the more significantly they experience its effects. In light of what we know about socialization and acculturation of other kinds, we expect that people are more likely to adapt to their new surroundings and become skilled at deploying the social class’s cultural tools as their time in that class environment increases. Further, evidence suggests that people who merely work with others from different classes, those who have moved up or down through classes very quickly, and those who experience different social class contexts only in small doses are unlikely to expand their cultural toolkit to the same degree as those who spend significant time inhabiting different social classes.

**Proposition 2a:** The expansiveness of class transitioners’ cultural toolkit is affected by the duration of time spent in each social class such that more time relates to greater accumulation of and adeptness using the tools associated with that class position.

**Timing of exposure.** The extent to which transitioners add to their cultural toolkit is also likely influenced by when in their life course they transition. Research on sensitive or critical periods of human development suggests that people are more influenced by their context early in life, when they are more readily imprinted with information (Gray, 1958). Evidence from sociology and health sciences similarly affirms that environment has larger effects on the young (George, 1993). Life course socialization researchers argue that perspectives and norms such as attitudes to work, gender role stereotypes, learning styles, and interpersonal competencies are learned early in life through one’s parents, early schooling, and experience with organized sports (Jablin, 2001). For example, cohorts of young children who experienced the Great Depression of the 1930s were more adversely affected than were adolescents (Elder, 1974), and social class scholars have argued and found evidence that some of the values imprinted during one’s childhood persist and guide behavior later in life, even after one’s circumstances have changed (Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; Martin et al., 2016).

Given that one’s early life is a critical and impressionable time, it is not surprising that research on other kinds of cultural transitions similarly concludes that one’s age at the time of transitions is an important antecedent of success in acculturating to a new environment. Specifically,
acculturation to new environments may be faster, less stressful, and more successful for younger transitioners (Berry, 1997; Brandtstaedter & Greve, 1994). Extant social class research supports the argument that early experiences are particularly impactful. Recent evidence suggests that people who make upward class transitions when they are children achieve better life outcomes and avoid the negative aspects of growing up in a lower social class environment more readily than those who transition later in life (Chetty & Hendren, 2016). Therefore, we expect that class transitions are more likely to prompt the acquisition of and efficacy using new cultural tools when they occur earlier in the transitioner’s life.

**Proposition 2b:** The expansiveness of class transitioners’ cultural toolkit is affected by when in their lives the transitions occur such that earlier transitions produce a larger expansion of their cultural toolkit than later transitions.

**Transition Direction**

We anticipate that the direction of one’s class transition matters and that upward and downward trajectories will not expand one’s toolkit to the same degree. We expect this for two reasons.

First, if early life socialization imprints deep-level values and social tendencies (Lutfly & Mortimer, 2006; Martin et al., 2016; Schein, 1971), it is likely that the differences in values and norms learned in individuals’ social class origin may lead them to differ in the degree to which they engage with new class environments during their transition. Those from higher social class backgrounds are more likely to learn norms of independence and self-sufficiency (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Higher social class individuals tend to have access to resources allowing them to attain their personal needs and wants without relying on the help of others, they have a high degree of personal choice over their behaviors, and they can exert a lot of influence over their environment. By contrast, those in lower social class environments tend to have limited resources, face high constraints on their choices, and need to rely on those in their communities and social circles in order to get things done (Kraus et al., 2012; Piff, 2014). These different environmental realities lead those in higher classes to learn norms of independence and social separation, whereas those from lower classes learn to be more interdependent (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). The norms of independence typifying the higher-class experience are likely to reduce the extent to which people who move down the social class ladder will integrate into and engage with their new environment. By contrast, norms of interdependence learned in lower social class contexts encourage social responsiveness, social connectivity, and adjustment to new situations (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Further, those from lower-class environments are often more prosocially motivated and have higher empathy (Piff et al., 2012), suggesting they will be more motivated to make social connections as they move to different positions on the social class ladder.

A second reason why the transition direction might matter is that transitions up and down the social class ladder may not be equally desirable (Lipset & Bendix, 1959). Moving up the social class ladder corresponds to gaining resources, status, and better life outcomes of various types, while moving down the class ladder connotes the opposite (Roberts, Kuncel, Shiner, Caspi, & Goldberg, 2007). People in higher social classes have access to influential networks of people (Domhoff, 1998), greater well-being (Howell & Howell, 2008), and better access to prestigious occupations (Rivera, 2012). Attaining or retaining these and other benefits that high social class affords likely motivates people to pursue higher social class standing or retain the high social class standing they have. As such, we would expect that people moving up the social class ladder are motivated to engage with more enriched environments in order to learn how to effectively navigate them, because doing so affords many desirable outcomes. Conversely, people who are moving down the social class ladder are motivated to retain the benefits afforded by their prior social class and are therefore likely to expend more effort trying to engage with and maintain their position in the social networks and contexts they are departing. This reluctance to engage in the classes one moves through on the way down suggests that downwardly mobile individuals will be less likely to adopt many of the cultural tools of the lower social classes they experience. In contrast, upwardly mobile individuals should be particularly likely to engage with and adopt the cultural tools of the classes they pass through.
because of what they stand to gain. Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, we expect that the direction of one’s class transition relates to the expansion of one’s cultural toolkit.

Proposition 3: The direction of class transitioners’ trajectory relates to the expansion of their cultural toolkit such that upward transitions expand the toolkit to a greater extent than do downward transitions.

TKIT DEPLOYMENT STRATEGIES AND OUTCOMES

People use their cultural toolkits to accomplish desired outcomes (Swidler, 1986, 2001). In considering how to leverage their toolkit, class transitioners are likely to consider the benefits and costs they and the members of their collective could accrue. We suggest three strategies class transitioners are likely to employ when using their cultural toolkits: targeting, brokering, and blending. We argue that each strategy involves trade-offs between individual and collective benefits and that transitioners select their strategy by considering the potential gains and losses that could accrue to them personally, weighed against the gains and losses that could accrue to their groups. In discussing the individual factors transitioners consider in their calculus, we focus on the amount of effort they personally would need to expend in using different tools and the potential informational advantages they could accrue. In terms of the group outcomes they may consider, we focus on the impact that transitioners’ use of cultural tools could have on their groups’ levels of relationship conflict. We focus on these broad outcomes because they are well established in the diversity literature and the broader management literature concerning those who span group boundaries (Clair, Beatty, & MacLean, 2005; Harrison, Price, & Bell, 1998; Harrison et al., 2002; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999; Keller & Loewenstein, 2011; Pelled, Eisenhardt, & Xin, 1999; Reagans & McEvily, 2003; Srikanth, Harvey, & Peterson, 2016; Zhu et al., 2016). Last, we posit that the direction of class transition is related to how transitioners evaluate and prioritize the potential trade-offs between individual and group gains and losses. Notably, transitioners’ effectiveness at utilizing any strategy is related to the expansiveness of their toolkit such that the narrower the toolkit, the less effective they are likely to be at any particular strategy, and the more expansive the toolkit, the more effective they will be at implementing their strategy.

Deployment Strategies

Targeting. A targeting strategy is one where class transitioners select an organizational group whose membership is most beneficial to them personally and then solely deploy the cultural tools of that group in order to be seen entirely and exclusively as one of its members. Targeting is similar to “passing,” which has been defined as “masquerading as another in order to enjoy the privileges afforded to the dominant group” (Leary, 1999: 85; see also Clair et al., 2005) and involves hiding a stigmatized identity. Unlike passing or related impression management constructs such as assimilating (Roberts, 2005), targeting does not connote assimilation into a dominant or positively viewed social group, nor is it necessarily acting like something one is not (Reid, 2015).

There may be instances where it is beneficial to target one’s cultural tools to align with a dominant group. Indeed, people who have transitioned to a lower social class may elect not to display any of the cultural tools they have learned while transitioning downward. For example, those who have lost resources may still recognize that there are benefits to being seen as members of the higher class they used to occupy, and they may choose to display only the norms of that class, even if they also know the tools of another class. Doing so may allow them to remain socially connected to those group members who have more power and resources. There are other instances in which transitioners may use their tools to target and assimilate into a less dominant group if it serves their desired outcomes. Take the case of a white-collar manager from a blue-collar background who leads a team of blue-collar workers. This person may choose to increase their perceived legitimacy with lower-class employees by suppressing their higher-class cultural elements (Arnett & Sidanius, 2018) and deploying lower-class tools in a targeting strategy. Importantly, the people adopting a targeted strategy are not necessarily trying to pass for something they are not. Indeed, people who have transitioned and learned the cultural tools of different classes legitimately have both higher- and lower-class
experiences that allow them to claim the full range of their cultural understanding, or to use only part of that range.

**Brokering.** A brokering strategy is one where a class transitioner deploys their cultural tools selectively to act as an intermediary between different organizational groups but does not engage in efforts to build understanding between groups about why differences in perspectives, values, or norms exist. This strategy is related to "revealing" in studies of stigmatized identities, in that it involves revealing one’s group memberships. However, revealing typically involves subtly signaling one’s identity, normalizing one’s stigma, or differentiating oneself from others (Clair et al., 2005), whereas brokering is a strategic use of one’s multicultural abilities to act as an intercessor between groups and gain an informational advantage.

This strategy involves alternating between sections of one’s toolkit to appeal to the parties one is dealing with at a given moment in order to be a boundary spanner who connects diverse members of a collective. This could include a person who has transitioned from a lower- to a higher-class position choosing to display the norms of lower-class culture when interacting with lower-class organizational members and then switching to deploy higher-class cultural tools when dealing with higher-ranking organizational members. This strategy is similar to code-switching (Molinsky, 2007), in that it requires transitioners to be aware of the tools that are best used in various situations. However, for behavior to qualify as code-switching, a person must be in a situation with unfamiliar norms or values that conflict with their own. Brokering is different because it does not presuppose that switching between elements of one’s toolkit is unnatural or foreign or that norms are in conflict. The development of a broad toolkit depends on developing familiarity and ease of use with the norms and values of various class groups.

**Blending.** A blending strategy is one where transitioners deploy their toolkit broadly across cultural boundaries and share their knowledge and cultural understanding with different organizational parties or groups in ways that facilitate increased sensitivity, inclusion, and mutual understanding. The goal of this strategy is to enhance cultural knowledge for all members and to ease the tensions that diverse perspectives might bring by helping people understand what the differences are and why they exist, and to increase sensitivity to those differences. Blending is related to but distinct from the normalizing and differentiating behaviors posited in the literature on passing or revealing (Clair et al., 2005). Normalizing and differentiating occur when individuals choose to reveal a stigmatized social identity in a way that makes that identity seem commonplace or that highlights differences in an attempt to challenge others’ perceptions of the difference while preserving their marginal position in a group (Clair et al., 2005). Blending is about revealing one’s own differences by showing that one has made a transition and has cultural knowledge that spans groups, but it is less concerned with challenging others’ perspectives and more concerned with increasing sensitivity and understanding so that different groups come to feel less marginalized, to understand each other’s cultural registers, and to interact effectively without a broker. Blending behaviors include translating what cultural norms or symbols mean and explaining why they have cultural relevance, helping members from different groups take each other’s perspectives and connect on shared experiences, and helping people understand what other group members might be thinking or feeling about an issue and why. Blending generally helps people from culturally distinct groups to understand one another and see the hidden factors that drive the differences.

**Relationships Between Deployment Strategies and Outcomes**

**Individual exhaustion.** Regarding the effort one expends in using class tools, engaging in activities that bridge different groups is likely to require switching between different cultural elements, which can be difficult and requires vigilance and cognitive resources (Molinsky, 2007). Cross-class interactions can also be stressful and carry the potential for conflict and misunderstanding (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). Organization members who display the cultural elements of various groups are definitionally not fully conforming to the norms of any one specific group (Flap & Völker, 2001), and those who span boundaries are not typically central or deeply embedded in a social network (Burt, 2017; Granovetter, 1973; Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Therefore, increased use of the full range of their cultural tools could lead class transitioners to feel socially different, which depletes their
cognitive and emotional resources (Muraven, Tice, & Baumeister, 1998; Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Molinsky, 2013).

On top of these difficulties, bridging different groups can be considered extra-role behavior in that deploying the cultural tools of different groups is likely voluntary and not a formally specified aspect of one’s job (Van Dyne, Cummings, & McLean Parks, 1995). While engaging in extra-role behaviors has many positive outcomes for individuals and organizations, these behaviors can be exhausting for the people doing them. Engaging in frequent extra-role behaviors can take time away from making progress toward or completing those things that are formally required in one’s job, and this can lead to increased perceived workload, more acutely experienced time pressure, and, ultimately, greater exhaustion (Ilies, Dimotakis, & De Pater, 2010; Koopman, Lanaj, & Scott, 2016). Thus, we expect that the more people make use of the full range of their toolkit of cultural resources, the more it will lead to exhaustion.

A targeting strategy is likely to require the least amount of individual effort. Switching between different sets of cultural tools can be cognitively taxing (Molinsky, 2007), and knowing which tools to express at what time can be difficult. Engaging in culturally ambiguous tasks can deplete one’s cognitive and emotional resources (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006; Louis & Sutton, 1991). Choosing to narrowly deploy their toolkit at a targeted set of people in a group or organization allows class transitioners to experience less ambiguity, because once they target a group they want to join, they know what tools to deploy and which to omit; no switching is required.

With a brokering strategy, transitioners can serve as boundary spanners (Reagans & McEvily, 2003). Scholars have noted that those who possess diverse cultural information and understanding are able to “act as bridges between colleagues . . . [and] business units” (Molinsky, 2007). However, as mentioned before, a brokering strategy requires switching between different sets of cultural tools and, thus, likely consumes more cognitive and emotional resources than does a targeting strategy (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006; Louis & Sutton, 1991; Molinsky, 2007). Brokering also likely takes more time away from the formal requirements of one’s job than does targeting (Koopman et al., 2016). All of these factors suggest that a brokering strategy will relate to more exhaustion than will a targeting strategy.

Finally, a blending strategy is likely to be the most demanding and consume the most resources. Like brokering, blending is an extra-role behavior, but, additionally, it involves educating others as to why differences exist and how they affect members’ perspectives, values, and norms. Further, whereas brokering allows transitioners discretion in that it can be done when transitioners deem it useful, a blending strategy involves vigilance about where and when transitioners see cultural differences causing role conflict or values disagreements in a group, and willingness to step into these conflicts to engage in translating and teaching behaviors around those differences. Heightened vigilance and conflict have been related to burnout and the depletion of one’s regulatory resources (Crowe & Higgins, 1997; Harrison & Klein, 2007; Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012; Lee & Ashforth, 1996; Lin & Johnson, 2015). Thus, blending likely involves the highest workload for class transitioners and, correspondingly, should relate to the highest levels of individual exhaustion.

Proposition 4a: A targeting strategy is related to low individual exhaustion.

Proposition 4b: A brokering strategy is related to moderate individual exhaustion.

Proposition 4c: A blending strategy is related to high individual exhaustion.

Information advantage. Class transitioners may deploy their toolkit to gain access to and enhance their ability to broker information between groups that are otherwise disconnected or do not possess a shared cultural understanding. People of similar education, income, and occupation—and, it follows, having similar cultural toolkits—form tight networks (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001). Further, there tends to be greater information flow within groups than between groups (Burt, 2017). Multicultural individuals develop cross-cultural fluency that allows them to communicate and be effective between cultures (Bell & Harrison, 1996; Oyserman, 2011). To the degree that class transitioners possess an expanded cultural toolkit, their engagement in class-spanning activities should allow them to connect with organizational members occupying different social classes or from different
social class backgrounds. Being able to span otherwise separated groups gives one access to early and potentially novel information (Burt, 2004). People who occupy these spanning positions have significant control over how information is conveyed, how it is framed, and whom to connect within the different groups. Class transitioners can use these opportunities to control the flow of information to accumulate influence and advantages for themselves (Burt, 2017).

A targeting strategy likely provides little informational advantage. Exclusively or even dominantly deploying the tools of a specific target organizational group likely gives transitioners access to the information of their chosen group but not to the information of others. By aligning with a targeted group, transitioners’ desire and capacity to span boundaries are likely limited. They will not have access to the different pools of information that exist in other groups, and, accordingly, their capacity to broker the flow of information and obtain informational advantages is curtailed (Burt, 1992; Reagans & McEvily, 2003).

A brokering strategy where class transitioners act as intermediaries between groups and team members with different cultural registers gives transitioners access to different pools of information and greater control over how information is conveyed between and framed for different parties (Burt, 2004). Wider cultural knowledge increases one’s abilities to speak with a wide variety of people and build coalitions or to more effectively sell issues (Dutton & Ashford, 1993; Tesluk & Jacobs, 1998). These behaviors can help class transitioners accumulate informational advantages and disperse their knowledge strategically to create rewarding opportunities for themselves (Burt, 2017). We therefore expect that a brokering strategy relates to transitioners’ accumulation of significant informational advantages.

Despite encouraging the use of a broader set of class tools, a blending strategy is likely to sacrifice the informational advantage class transitioners can obtain with a brokering strategy. The goal of a blending strategy is to make plain the differences between people and inform them as to why differences exist so that they can become more culturally understanding. Increased familiarity or contact with dissimilar others can reduce the tensions that lead different cultural groups to avoid one another (Broockman & Kalla, 2016; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) and lower the barriers to connecting directly. Indeed, if members of diverse groups can connect directly, a boundary spanner’s potential for brokerage is diminished (Burt, 2017).

Relationship conflict. Class transitioners could benefit their collectives by increasing cultural understanding among workgroup members and reducing the potential for relationship conflict. Diversity can trigger social categorization processes that reduce coordination and cohesion and reflect different understandings or mental models of how to accomplish tasks, both of which lead to increased relational conflict (Srikanth et al., 2016). Deploying diverse cultural knowledge to span cultural gaps may allow class transitioners to increase the flow of information passing among diverse group members, and can thereby ease some of the coordination and understanding issues related to group conflict. To the extent that transitioners further share their cultural knowledge to enlighten others about diverse perspectives and why they exist, this may open lines of communication and information exchange between groups. Having an expanded class toolkit that includes navigating social context with different experiences, values, norms, and perspectives should facilitate making sense of how people interpret situations differently and helping people understand the frames through which those from different social classes might view issues. Generating understanding around these differences or explaining why different perspectives and expectations exist may help group members perform better (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014) and engender greater cohesion and integration within groups that have social class diversity (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003; Harrison et al., 2002).

By deploying only the tools necessary to appeal to one targeted group and limiting the extent to which transitioners engage in boundary spanning, a targeting strategy does not facilitate the flow of information between groups, nor does it enlighten diverse group members as to why
differences exist and how they guide decisions and behaviors. Lacking a shared cultural understanding is a significant driver of relationship conflict in diverse groups (Jehn et al., 1999; Keller & Loewenstein, 2011). As such, we further expect that a targeting strategy will not help to ease the relationship conflict that can exist in diverse groups.

A brokering strategy is likely to ease some of the relationship conflict that can occur in diverse groups. Low information flow between groups relates to perceived threat and intergroup tensions (Dawes & Massey, 2005; Kahn & Mentzer, 1998; Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). Having individuals who can connect different groups and relay information between them presents the potential for easing at least some potential relationship conflict by increasing the information flow. Furthermore, increasing intergroup contact and collaboration, even in small ways, is related to improved relations between groups (Harrison et al., 2002; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Brokering between groups allows information to flow—albeit in a limited and controlled fashion—between groups where it otherwise might not. Increased information flow should lead to at least a somewhat improved understanding of where people from different groups stand on issues, what priorities are important to them, and how they view issues. It also should reduce some of the tensions between groups and, thus, ameliorate some of the potential relationship conflict compared to groups between which information does not flow.

By increasing understanding and contact between group members, a blending strategy can reduce the tension and disagreements that relate to group-level relationship conflict. Relationship conflict can occur in response to diversity because it leads to social categorization (Srikanth et al., 2016; Tajfel, 1982) and the resulting negative effects on cohesion and coordination. Evidence suggests that firsthand contact between members of different groups can increase understanding and sensitivity while reducing intergroup bias (Broockman & Kalla, 2016) by leading to “de-categorization,” where people view each other as more similar than they did prior to interaction (Gaertner et al., 1999). When people overcome their initial biases and have greater understanding of diverse group members, this increases interaction quality (Gonsalkorale, von Hippel, Sherman, & Klauer, 2009). In addition, by increasing sensitivity to and understanding of the differences among group members and improving interaction quality, a blending strategy can increase the extent to which diverse group members cooperate with each other directly. Greater cooperation changes how members view their groups, increasing the perception that a group is a unified entity rather than a divided one (Gaertner, Mann, Dovidio, Murrell, & Pomare, 1990). Thus, we expect that compared to a targeting or brokering strategy, a blending strategy most effectively reduces relationship conflict in diverse groups.

Proposition 6a: A targeting strategy is related to high relationship conflict.
Proposition 6b: A brokering strategy is related to moderate relationship conflict.
Proposition 6c: A blending strategy is related to low relationship conflict.

Transition Direction and Strategy Selection

We expect that the direction of class transitioners’ trajectory will influence what deployment strategy they select. As mentioned above, while many lessons about how to effectively navigate a context are learned as individuals transition between different classes, transitioners’ core values are likely imprinted during their early class experiences (Ashforth et al., 2007; Jablin, 2001). This suggests that even if transitioners have learned to effectively navigate social contexts and understand people with diverse values and perspectives on their class journey, their core personal values are likely to be those instilled early in life.

Those beginning in higher social classes and moving downward should be more likely to have internalized more self-enhancing and self-oriented values that persist, despite their change of context (Martin et al., 2016; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014), and those differences should motivate the selection of different behaviors (Schwartz, 1994). We would therefore expect that those who have transitioned from higher to lower classes would be more likely to prioritize their individual outcomes to a higher degree than would those who have made upward transitions. This suggests that their imprinted values should make them more likely to choose a strategy requiring the least amount of individual effort or
bringing them the most personal benefit. As such, we would expect that downward transitioners are more likely to choose a targeting or brokering strategy because these strategies allow them either to save the effort of alternating between cultural tools or to use their tools to broker information for their own advantage.

By comparison, those who have moved from a lower to a higher class will have internalized more self-transcendent, other-oriented values (Piff et al., 2010; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Researchers have found that leaders who grow up in lower-class backgrounds are more likely to engage in such behaviors as showing concern and care for their followers (Martin et al., 2016), which aligns with research suggesting that lower-class status is related to increased empathy for others (Stellar, Manzo, Kraus, & Keitner, 2012). Other-oriented values should lead upward transitioners to use a wider swath of their cultural toolkit to relate to more people in their collectives and use their cultural knowledge to address issues that might be adversely impacting their collectives. Upwardly mobile individuals should be more likely to engage in a blending strategy because they prioritize the community to a greater extent and are more empathic to other members than are transitioners moving in the other direction. This would motivate them to use their tools to alleviate relationship conflict in their collectives. These individuals would therefore show greater willingness to sacrifice some of their own potential for personal gain in order to help the collective and improve the relationship quality among people with different cultural understandings.

Proposition 7: The direction of class transitioners’ trajectory will relate to the strategy they select in deploying their toolkit such that upward transitioners will make greater use of their toolkit to benefit the collective via a blending strategy, whereas downward transitioners will use their toolkit to benefit themselves via targeting and brokering strategies.

In sum, these propositions suggest that different strategies for using one’s class-related information involve trade-offs between benefits accruing to a transitioner and those accruing to the transitioner’s groups. Transitioners likely choose a targeting strategy because it requires the least effort on their part and reflects a willingness to give lower priority to their groups’ relational quality and their own potential for informational advantage in order to save themselves the effort involved in appealing to multiple groups. A brokering strategy, by contrast, is likely to require more effort from the class transitioner than a targeting strategy because it involves switching tools and going between groups. It is also more likely than a targeting strategy to improve intergroup relations because it allows at least some information to flow between group members and increase understanding. Finally, more than the other strategies, brokering represents a willingness to exert greater effort and endure some relationship conflict in exchange for garnering the greatest informational advantage for oneself. A blending strategy requires significant efforts from class transitioners to enhance understanding, enable freer exchange of information, and reduce relationship conflict. In choosing this strategy, class transitioners sacrifice their personal well-being and potential informational advantage in service of facilitating better group dynamics. Finally, the direction of the transition one has made has influences the process by imprinting certain values or behavioral tendencies that will shape the degree to which one seeks to maximize personal benefits versus sacrificing oneself for the betterment of the group.

Intersectional Influences

Our theorizing thus far has focused on social class as a permeable and intersectional form of diversity and has detailed how the experiences of social class transitioners enable them to develop and become adroit at using a unique and organizationally important set of abilities and understandings. However, people of different races and genders may not experience class transitions similarly (Cole & Omari, 2003), and, indeed, we expect that race and gender relate to our model in two important ways. First, we expect that race and gender relate to our model in two important ways. First, we expect that race and gender may relate to the class distance that transitioners travel and the tools they are able to acquire and use effectively. Second, we expect that race and gender may relate to the class distance that transitioners travel and the tools they are able to acquire and use effectively. Second, we expect that race and gender will influence the selection of a strategy by altering the perceived relationships between deployment strategies and outcomes. These relationships appear in gray at the bottom of Figure 1.

Of note, we recognize that the experiences and effects of race and gender are not equivalent or
interchangeable. We discuss them jointly here in order to broadly describe how these two socially salient differences relate to the challenges of making class transitions when individuals are identifiably from groups that carry socially constructed status signals (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). In addition, because our focus is on developing theory about social class transitions, and because many other theoretical perspectives concerning the effects of race and gender have been proposed (Brief et al., 2005; Crenshaw, 1991; Lau & Murnighan, 1998), we refrain from building formal Propositions. Instead, we note the following arguments to situate our theorizing in the broader diversity literature and to illustrate some potential limits on the abilities of class transitioners to bridge all kinds of differences.

First, concerning the size of class transitions people make, evidence suggests that women and minorities face greater challenges making upward class transitions because of both structural and cognitive factors (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, & Vanneman, 2001; Torche, 2017). In terms of structural factors, discrimination in the labor market, neighborhood, school, and other venues affects women’s and racial minorities’ upward progress by reducing access to or providing lower-quality opportunities for advancement (Alexander, Entwisle, & Olson, 2014; Bertrand & Mullainathan, 2004; Cook & Glass, 2014; Milkman, Akinola, & Chugh, 2015).

Cognitively, it has been suggested that class mobility is not experienced similarly by people across racial and gender groups. Concerning race, James Baldwin (1985) wrote of African Americans’ desire to move up in society, but also the social and emotional “price of the ticket” for doing so. Research has confirmed that moving up can take a toll on minorities because of the perceived connection between moving up and needing to conform to stereotypes that are used to form expectations about others’ behaviors (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Ridgeway, 2001). When people act in ways that conform to social expectations, their behaviors are seen as legitimate and are more likely to be influential in a group. Conversely, when behaviors are misaligned with expectations, they are seen as illegitimate and are evaluated more negatively (Correll & Ridgeway, 2006). This creates a double standard where people from different classes to the extent that those tools are also
associated with specific racial or gender expectations (Williams, Sng, & Neuberg, 2016). That is, some cultural tools may be associated with being lower- or upper-class in a general sense that transcends race or gender, and people from any racial or gender category could be seen as legitimate when using them. However, other cultural tools may be associated with an intersecting combination of class, race, and gender such that they are associated with rich Black women, poor White men, rich White people, poor women, or some other combination. The likelihood that a transitioner is seen as legitimate when using a cultural element that is associated with a combination of social class, race, or gender will likely be constrained by the transitioner’s own race and gender. It follows that in contexts where specific intersections of tools are valued, class transitioners may perceive that some strategies are less effective for them if they do not possess the more stable traits associated with those tools. For instance, to the extent that some specific higher-class White male behaviors are socially valued and prioritized in a context, women and minority class transitioners—even those who have transitioned to higher social class positions—may be seen as less legitimate when engaging in those specific behaviors. This would suggest that a targeting strategy may be more challenging for them to execute because certain important elements are not as effective, thus changing the perceived utility of this strategy. Instead, transitioners who find they are not in a dominant racial or gender group may be more likely to select a brokering or blending strategy, perceiving that while it also may be exhausting to engage in these behaviors, they at least offer some possibility of increasing cultural understanding within their group or accruing some informational advantage. Accordingly, we expect that race and gender connect to our proposed model by influencing the distance that class transitioners travel, as well as the relationships between the strategies they select and the outcomes we propose.

CONTRIBUTIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

We positioned social class as a permeable and intersectional form of diversity to suggest that class transitioners accumulate cultural tools enabling them to relate across the differences in values, norms, and perspectives that are prioritized in different class environments and found in other categories of diversity intersecting with class. We argued that in choosing how to use their tools, transitioners consider trade-offs between helping their collectives and helping themselves. Thus, we described not only how transitioners could help alleviate tension and enable the flow of information within diverse groups but also why they may choose not to. We also argued for the importance of considering transition directions in understanding how class transitioners develop and deploy their toolkit. This work contributes to theory concerning social class, cultural diversity and inclusion, and cultural transitions of other kinds. Below we discuss these contributions and articulate future research directions.

Social Class and Other Transitions

In prior management research, scholars largely treated social class as static and studied either someone’s current class or their class origin (Barling & Weatherhead, 2016; Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2015; Martin et al., 2016). We propose a dynamic perspective, arguing that it is important to consider how moving between classes shapes people, because there may be organizationally germane abilities and perspectives that accrue via transitions that are not properties of any one class. We therefore open the door to theorizing about how cultural practices may shift as people move up and down and what the consequences of exposure to those changes may be. Another area for development stems from our argument that upward and downward transitions are not equally desirable and may influence how people use their experiences to address tensions or allow them to persist.

Further, scholars have noted that the diversity literature needs more theory around how categories of diversity differ in meaningful ways (van Dijk et al., 2017). Our framework helps distinguish class transitions from transitions of other kinds, while also mutually informing those areas. Below we consider the distinctiveness of social class transitions in relation to occupational mobility and transitions between national or organizational cultures.

Unlike occupational or career mobility, class transitions are rooted in changes to a person’s resource environment external to work—changes that begin early in life. Occupational or career
mobility could correspond to changes in class position if it also connoted changes in income or occupational prestige. However, without considering where one’s class journey began, we obtain limited—and potentially misleading—insight into how one’s trajectory relates to the values one holds or how those values might change. For instance, consider two people, Person X and Person Y, who both get good jobs and several promotions. They have experienced similar career mobility. However, if Person X was born into an upper-middle-class family and went to elite schools, while Person Y was born into a working-class family then attended a good school, Person Y would have experienced a greater class transition and been exposed to a wider array of cultural tools.

Management research considering transitions and adjustments to new countries or organizational cultures has largely focused on expatriates’ foreign assignment experiences or employees’ adjustments during a merger or acquisition, respectively. This work suggests that the more distant two national or organizational cultures are, the less likely the transitioners are to effectively adjust to their new context (Ashforth et al., 2007; Berry, 1997; Graebner et al., 2017; Stahl & Caligiuri, 2005). However, class transitions are more incremental and continuous than those between countries or companies. Time is an important predictor of adjustment (Zhu et al., 2016), and, thus, more gradual transitions should positively relate to adjustment, suggesting that the social class distance one has traveled in one’s life will positively relate to one’s learning and development.

Cross-national transitions, specifically, are often studied in terms of whether a transitioner adjusts to a new host country. Rarely are cross-cultural transitioners seen as existing in and translating between two cultures simultaneously (Baruch, Altman, & Tung, 2016). Indeed, evidence suggests that cross-national individuals may struggle to effectively blend groups across geographic distances (Zolin, Hinds, Fruchter, & Levitt, 2004). Class transitioners, to the extent that they choose to use their tools in a brokering or blending strategy, may serve the role of translating between their class of origin and their current class among people who are collocated. And in terms of a targeting strategy, class transitioners likely have greater abilities to blend in than do expats and other cross-national individuals who may encounter language barriers or be of a different ethnic background. The visible elements of social class (e.g., clothing brands, musical preferences, and other cultural symbols) are likely more readily altered or concealed than are accents or ethnic background. These differences give class transitioners potentially greater discretion in the degree to which they show or make use of their tools than expats or cross-national transitioners.

While social class transition is distinct from other kinds of transitions, we believe that our theoretical perspective on class transitioners informs research on transitioners of other kinds. Moving up in social class standing connotes access to greater resources and prestige, while downward movement connotes the opposite, which may relate to motivations and affective differences in moving up or down. Further, the values and norms imprinted by class origins are likely to shape whether and how transitioners engage with the cultural tools of a new environment. While studies of cross-national experiences and integration into new companies have shown how cultural distance negatively relates to ease of acculturation, researchers may do well to similarly consider the direction of the transition. That is, moving from China to the United States may not be equivalent to moving in the opposite direction in the mind of the expatriate, because the different norms, values, and perspectives that have been imprinted, or the differences in perceived motivation to move in one direction compared to the other, may relate to whether transitioners engage in the behaviors that predict effective adjustment.

Diversity in Groups and Teams

Diversity in groups, particularly concerning values and perspectives, can lead to conflict, reduced cohesiveness, and withdrawal (Harrison & Klein, 2007; Harrison et al., 2002). Considered from a static perspective, social class diversity could be particularly damaging. Class diversity reflects differences in values, social power, and prestige and is intersectional with other more visible forms of diversity, like race and gender. This raises the possibility that class differences are quite likely to co-occur with group faultlines or differences on multiple dimensions (Thatcher, Jehn, & Zanutto, 2003).

In prior research scholars have largely explored contextual or structural approaches to managing diversity in order to maximize the
benefits of task conflict while minimizing the
detriments of relationship conflict. In this re-
search the role of specific individual group
members in addressing the issue has been
largely overlooked (Guillaume et al., 2017). Here
we argued that class transitioners can use dif-
cerent cultural tools acquired through diverse
class experiences to connect with people across
various categories of diversity to improve re-
relationship quality, enable the flow of information
among group members, improve coordination,
and reduce conflict across diverse group mem-
bers. We further suggested reasons why people
who are able to bridge these gaps and improve
outcomes for the collective choose not to—
because doing so comes with trade-offs that might
cost them personal resources like information or
energy.

In developing our theory, we described cultural
tools as a collection of stories, rituals, frames, and
practices (Giorgi et al., 2015) that class tran-
sitioners could deploy. We argued that class tran-
sitioners could acquire and deploy cultural tools
generally, but we did not speak to how class
transitioners might make use of specific cultural
elements with greater or lesser nuance. We be-
lieve this presents interesting possibilities for
future research, particularly as it pertains to class
tools that are associated with specific race and
gender categories and to how some transitioners
may navigate those differences in groups. It is
possible that some class transitioners are partic-
ularly savvy about what tools are class specific
and what tools pertain to specific intersections
of class with other categories, and that they ac-
cordingly adjust the ways they use their cultural
knowledge.

One way of theorizing about how people per-
ceive and use specific tools is to consider cultural
elements as existing at different levels of con-
strual (Trope & Liberman, 2010). As an example,
at a high level of construal, the experience of re-
lying on one’s community is shared across races
and gender among those in low social class
positions, and it instills a tendency to have
an interdependent orientation toward others
(Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). At a low level
of construal, or with greater level of detail and
specificity, the various communities that lower-
class people rely on may look different, offer dif-
ferent kinds of help, engage in different rituals,
and tell different stories. When deploying their
cultural tools, savvy class transitioners may use
them at high or low levels of construal as they
demn necessary to relate to others. For instance,
when relating to lower-class people who are from
the same racial or gender category, transitioners
may choose to operate at a lower level of construal
and demonstrate that interdependence is a
shared value by invoking specific stories or prac-
tices that are culturally familiar in the in-
tersection of that shared combination of class
position and race or gender. Alternatively, when
relating to lower-class individuals from different
racial or gender categories, transitioners may, at
least initially, elect to use their tools at a higher
level of construal, broadly framing work-related
issues in ways that highlight the importance of
interdependence and other-orientation in order
emphasize shared values.

In both cases class transitioners deploy cultural
knowledge about lower social class positions and
interdependence, but in the former instance they
do so using more fine-grained cultural knowledge
because they have access to and legitimacy with
those tools. In the latter instance they demon-
strate cultural understanding by appealing at a
more abstract level because they may not have
access to or legitimacy using some specific cul-
tural tools. There is much work to be done to
understand how different levels of cultural
knowledge can be used to connect with others and
how those different ways of connecting relate to
individual and group outcomes.

Individual Differences

In our theorizing we did not delve into the role of
individual differences in how people develop and
use class tools, although we expect this to be
fruitful ground for future research. One individual
difference that we expect would be influential is
class identity (Destin, Rheinschmidt-Same, &
Richeson, 2017). We did not explicitly explore the
role of subjective class in this framework because
our focus was on how differences in material en-
vironments and the sequence in which they are
experienced impart cultural lessons and facilitate
the development and deployment of class tools,
but others have suggested exploring it from an
identity perspective (Destin et al., 2017). One’s
subjective social class reflects one’s social
identity and self-perceived status position
among peers (Kraus & Stephens, 2012), and re-
lates to psychological functioning (Adler, Epel,
Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Boyce, Brown, &
Moore, 2010). The way that people identify as members of social classes may be consequential in terms of how they engage with those contexts and adopt cultural tools.

Several frameworks have been proposed concerning how people identify with where they come from or where they are currently and how that relates to their engagement with and adjustment to new contexts (Berry, 1997; Fitzsimmons, 2013). We expect that similar dynamics are possible with class transitions. It is possible that in the course of their class transitions, some people come to identify strongly with one specific class, but it is also possible that they identify as class transitioners. Extrapolating from cross-cultural research, we believe class transitioners’ patterns of identification may relate to how deeply they engage with new class contexts and learn the cultural tools of these contexts. These patterns of identification may also influence the strategy they choose by shaping whether they want to belong to and be seen as belonging to various classes or to one specific class. For example, upward class transitioners who identify more with their class of origin may be more likely to use a blending or brokering strategy, whereas those who identify more with their destination class may be more likely to use targeting. Alternatively, on a downward trajectory, one who identifies with one’s class origin may be more likely to use a targeting strategy aimed at the higher-class group, while one who identifies with one’s destination may tend to use brokering or blending.

While focusing on how class contexts shape people, we recognize that there are individual differences in personality and other traits that relate to how effectively people adjust to or engage with new contexts. To wit, extroversion, openness, and proactivity are all related to effective socialization and information acquisition (Ashford & Black, 1996; Bauer, Bodner, Erdogan, Truxillo, & Tucker, 2007). Similar forces could influence the extent to which people engage with new social class contexts and develop familiarity with new cultural tools. Similarly, traits like self-monitoring influence the degree to which people moderate their actions to fit contexts (Snyder, 1974). Individual differences may relate to whether people deploy different tools to match their contexts and how effective they are at it. We expect that exploring how individual differences relate to the toolkit development and deployment process will be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Organizational Influences

Much of our theoretical framework described how people import cultural influences that exist outside of organizations into their groups (Harrison & Corley, 2011). These class-based cultural influences may interact with local contextual factors like the cultures and climates established within organizational groups. For example, elite firms are frequently populated with employees who come from similar privileged backgrounds but few from lower social class backgrounds (Rivera, 2012). When members of a group share a demographic characteristic, it becomes a pronounced and socially valued feature of the group (Mehra, Kilduff, & Brass, 1998; Reagans, Zuckerman, & McEvily, 2004), and deviations from that characteristic are likely not particularly welcome. Individuals who have transitioned from a low social class but find themselves working in an elite firm may not have much call to deploy the full range of their toolkit or connect diverse groups within the organization because there is simply not much diversity to span. In contrast, when there is heterogeneity along a category like social class, a group will be less likely to see “eliteness” as a core group feature, and group members may be more open to the deployment of tools from different class levels.

Furthermore, polarized groups tend to accentuate differences among people, and members come to see their own group positively while viewing other groups negatively (Iyengar & Westwood, 2015). It is possible that the group benefits of a blending strategy among strongly polarized groups are decreased while the perceived effort is greatly increased. This might make transitioners more likely to select another deployment strategy. For example, in this setting, being a broker might be particularly valuable because the stigmas between groups likely limit the number of other people who are willing to span groups. As well, contexts that clearly and regularly remind people of their class status might be particularly likely to provoke anxiety (Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013) and increase the tendencies to avoid cross-class interactions (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013), resulting in greater tendencies for class transitioners to select targeting strategies to avoid stigma and anxiety.
short, we expect that future theoretical work could explore how cultural dynamics within groups relate to how effectively class transitioners span group boundaries and ease tensions.

CONCLUSION

Social class is a permeable and intersectional form of diversity. Class transitioners are likely to have broad cultural experiences and knowledge that can be used to bridge cultural gaps and connect on shared experiences with a wide array of organizational members. However, doing so likely involves trade-offs between the positive impact transitioners could have on their group, informational advantages they could personally accrue, and the amount of effort they would need to expend. Such trade-offs provide insight into why transitioners might choose not to alleviate relationship conflict in a diverse group, even when they could. It is also important to consider the direction of transition that people make, because the values, norms, and perspectives imbued by their initial transitions that people make, because the values, norms, and perspectives imbued by their initial categories, particularly when those categories are intersectional with less-permeable categories, can connect with others on shared experiences to reduce conflict, increase cultural sensitivity, and promote inclusion.

REFERENCES


Firth, B. M., Chen, G., Kirkman, B. L., & Kim, K. 2014. Newcomers abroad: Expatriate adaptation during early phases of international assignments. *Academy of Management Journal*, 57: 280–300.


McDonald, M. L., & Westphal, J. D. 2013. Access denied: Low mentoring of women and minority first-time directors and
its negative effects on appointments to additional boards. 


