

WHAT WE FACE

Framing Problems in the Black Community¹

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Abstract

While many sociological studies analyze the causes, conditions, and mechanisms perpetuating American racial inequality, the literature on how African Americans understand and explain these inequalities is less developed. Drawing on 150 interviews with middle-class and working-class African American men and women, this paper analyzes inductively how respondents define and conceptualize the most pressing obstacles facing their group when probed on this question. We find that middle- and working-class respondents alike identify the problem of racism as the most salient obstacle facing African Americans. Class differences appear with respect to what other obstacles are singled out as salient: while middle-class respondents focus on lack of racial solidarity among Blacks and economic problems (in this order), working-class respondents are more concerned with the fragility of the Black family followed by the lack of racial solidarity. This analysis discusses the relevance of considering how groups make sense of obstacles, and of racism and discrimination in particular, for the study of destigmatization and antiracist strategies of stigmatized minorities.

Keywords: African Americans, Social Problems, Racism, Solidarity, Economics, Black Family

INTRODUCTION

The growing literature on responses to stigmatization begins with the premise that racism, discrimination, exclusion, and other forms of stigmatization are critical problems in the everyday experiences of members of stigmatized groups. While countless studies document the persistence of racial inequalities, racial discrimination, and negative attitudes towards Blacks and other minority groups (Carter 2003; Charles 2006; Conley 1999; Feagin 1991; Kirshenman and Neckerman, 1991; Lacy 2007; Lamont 2000; Massey and Denton, 1993; Pager 2007; Pettit and Western, 2004;

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Wilson 1987, 1997), we investigate what African Americans perceive to be the most important obstacles their group faces, and the salience of racism and discrimination in their responses.³ We contend that to effectively study destigmatization and anti-racism, we must understand how members of stigmatized groups make sense of the social problems facing their group.

Drawing on 150 interviews with middle- and working-class African Americans living in northern and central New Jersey,⁴ we examine which problems our respondents mentioned when asked “What do you think are some obstacles facing African Americans right now?” Using an inductive approach, we identify and analyze the most salient obstacles in the responses of each class group.

Recent scholarship shows a rise in the number of African Americans who adopt individual and cultural explanations of racial inequality that support conservative politics and limited policy intervention, as opposed to structural explanations that would justify adopting more equalizing policies (Bobo et al., Forthcoming; Hunt 1996, 2007).⁵ Against this background, one might suspect that racism and discrimination may be becoming less salient in their interpretation of problems facing their racial group. However, we find that our respondents mentioned racism more frequently than any other obstacle when describing the problems Blacks face today. Furthermore, we find that lack of racial solidarity, the decline of the Black family, and the precarious economic situation of African Americans are also salient topics of concern.

Experiences connected to being a member of a racially stigmatized group powerfully shape one’s understandings of the social world and of the place of one’s group in the environment. This is expressed by one of our respondents, a middle-class entrepreneur, when he states, “It’s what we face . . . Judgments are made about you. You often don’t even know that they’re [talking] about you. I’ve seen that many times.” This comment captures the sentiments of many of the African Americans in this study—their awareness, or expectation, that their racial group faces stigmatization. This experience colors their everyday experience in countless ways.

MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF RACE AND RACISM IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Numerous scholars explore the consequences of racism, prejudice, and discrimination (Pager and Shepherd, 2008; Quillian 2006). While social psychologists investigate the intrapsychological processes associated with stigma (Major and O’Brien, 2005), sociologists also investigate how contexts affect such processes (Link and Phelan, 2001). Recently, cultural sociologists have been expanding the study of anti-racism and destigmatization by exploring systematically how stigmatized minorities respond to and make sense of everyday experiences of racism, exclusion, and discrimination across a range of national contexts (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012).

Sociologists have explored ideal and behavioral responses that African Americans adopt when faced with racism and discrimination (Feagin 1991; Feagin and Sikes, 1994; Fleming et al., 2012; Jackson 2001; Lacy 2007; Lamont and Fleming, 2005). Feagin (1991) assesses how middle-class African Americans react to racism and discrimination in the public sphere, showing how their responses are influenced by an accumulation of individual and group discriminatory experiences. Lamont and Fleming (2005) demonstrate that elite African Americans aim to display competence to challenge racism (Welburn and Pittman, 2012). In their study of ideal responses to racism, Fleming et al. (2012) show that more middle- and working-class African Americans prefer to confront racism rather than deflate conflict. We add to this line

of research by specifically investigating the relative salience of racism as compared to other obstacles in the life of African Americans. We also ask: How do our respondents identify, define, and attribute meaning to these obstacles? Are there class differences in the patterns of responses to our question?

A shared feeling of stigmatization is an important component of African American social identity (Loury 2002, 2003). Building on Jenkins (2008), Brubaker and Cooper (2000), Lamont and Bail (2005), and Wimmer (2008), Lamont and Mizrachi (2012) note how processes of identification and the development of groupness are central to stigmatization research. Additionally, they highlight the meaning-making processes involved in responding to stigmatization (in line with Feagin 1991). We contend that studying perceived obstacles that Blacks face illuminates the important experiential, cultural, social-psychological aspects of social inequality.

Research on racial attitudes generally seeks to illuminate how respondents explain racial inequalities (Bobo et al., Forthcoming, offer a review). This literature often relies on survey research (Bobo 2001; Bobo and Charles, 2009; Bobo et al., Forthcoming; Hunt 1996, 2007; Kinder and Sanders, 1996; Krysan 2000; Zubrinsky and Bobo, 1996). For example, challenging strictly structural approaches to racial housing inequality (Massey and Denton, 1993; Wilson 1987), Charles (2006) draws upon survey data to explore how the preferences of different racial groups for neighborhood racial composition contribute to residential segregation. Also drawing on survey data, Bobo and Charles (2009; Bobo 2001) show that Blacks are more likely than other racial groups to view racial discrimination as systemic and pervasive. While this research documents distribution patterns of attitudes, it can be usefully complemented by an analysis of the relative salience of emergent frames, and of how African Americans interpret their experience.

This study is especially timely given the contemporary racial climate, which may be characterized as one of ambivalent racial progress. The nation celebrates at once anniversaries of groundbreaking events like *Brown v. Board of Education* and the election of Barack Obama, the first African American president (Bobo and Dawson, 2009; Bonilla-Silva 2009; Welburn and Pittman, 2012). But it also faces racially charged episodic events like the aftermath to Hurricane Katrina in 2005 and the Jena Six in 2006. Investigating how African Americans understand the obstacles their racial group faces during such times is thus important.

Next, we describe the data and sampling strategy. We then move to a discussion of the modal obstacles African Americans say they face, exploring differences and similarities across class lines.

DATA AND METHODS

This paper draws on data collected for a larger comparative project documenting and analyzing the strategies minority groups in Brazil, Israel, and the United States mobilize to cope with racism and discrimination (Lamont and Mizrachi, 2012). We draw data from the U.S. component of this larger project, titled “African American Responses to Racism and Discrimination.” More specifically, we draw on 150 in-depth interviews with middle-class and working-class African American men and women living in the United States (Fleming et al., 2012).⁶ This study compares respondents from the middle class, defined as college-educated professionals and managers, and respondents from the working class, defined as individuals with a high school degree who work steadily as low status white-collar workers or blue-collar workers. The sample is roughly equally split along gender and class lines. Respondents are between

twenty-five and sixty years of age, and live in northern and central New Jersey. As a research site, this region is especially diverse, with many locations and opportunities for interactions across racial and class lines (Jackson 2001).

The interview schedule sought to investigate boundary work along racial and class lines, antiracism strategies, and perceived discrimination and racism. The questions aimed to capture respondents' racial identification; their experiences with racism and discrimination; their views of African Americans, Whites, and other ethnic groups; their perspectives on (in)equality and the opportunity structure in society at large; and their perceptions of their environment. Interviews were transcribed and systematically coded using Atlas.ti.

Again, this paper focuses specifically on the answers respondents gave to the following open-ended question: "What do you think are some obstacles facing African Americans right now?" We also consider other mentions of obstacles or problems that African Americans face that emerged spontaneously in the interview. Thus, we aim to identify salient obstacles without a priori assumptions limiting the focus of the inquiry. We consider the meanings respondents attribute to those obstacles (Bobo 2004 and Krysan 2000 take similar approaches). Doing so provides new insight on racial attitudes, stratification beliefs, and group identity. To our knowledge, no other study employs an inductive approach to study the range and salience of obstacles facing the "Black community" as defined by African Americans.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

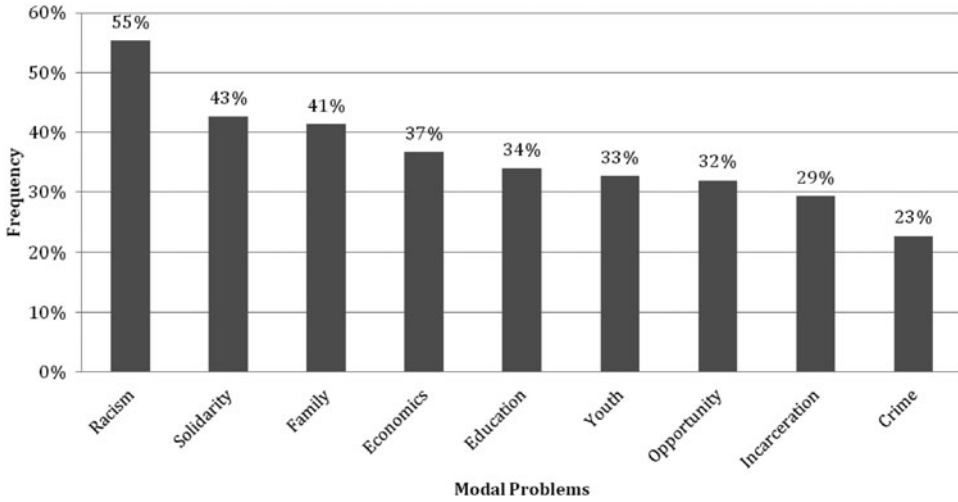
Modal Problems

This section describes the range and salience of obstacles facing African Americans as defined by respondents. "Range" refers to the number of obstacles that respondents mentioned and "salience" refers to the number of times each type of obstacle was mentioned (Lamont and Bail, 2005).⁷ Analyzing the range, salience, and framing of mentioned obstacles facing African Americans is important to tap how they understand the reasons behind the stigmatization of their group. In what follows, we first identify the modal obstacles for all respondents before turning to class differences. While we find greater similarities than differences with respect to range across classes, we find significant differences in salience, and in particular, differences in how obstacles are framed across class groups.

Figure 1 presents a snapshot of the most salient obstacles mentioned by all respondents. It shows that racism was the obstacle mentioned most often, singled out by over half of them (83 out of 150). It also reveals that 43% of respondents identified lack of racial solidarity as the second most salient obstacle.

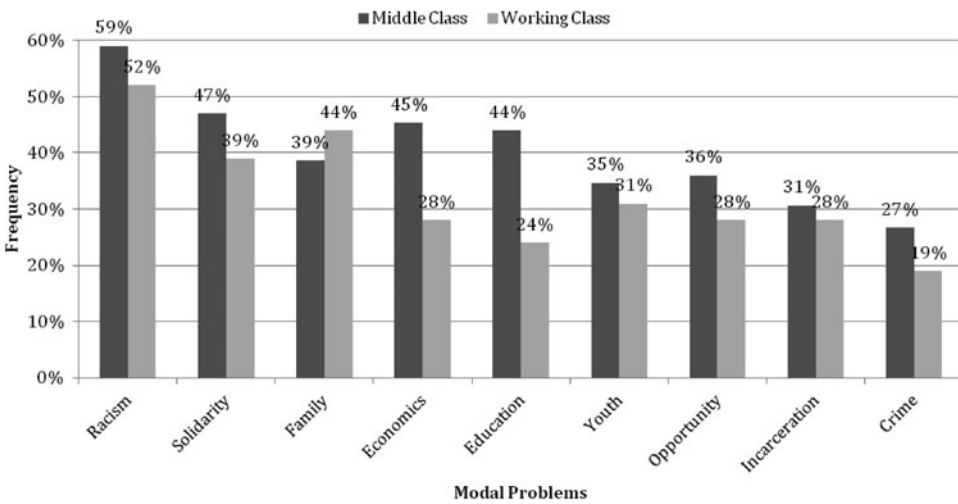
Figure 2 presents data on the salience of obstacles by class. Racism remains the most salient obstacle for middle-class and working-class respondents. Indeed, more than 50% of each group mentioned it when probed on this question. This clearly suggests the centrality of racism to our respondents' lives. Figure 2 also shows that more middle-class respondents considered lack of racial solidarity to be a serious obstacle for Blacks than was the case for working-class respondents (with respectively 47% and 39% of each group mentioning this obstacle; $t = 1.31$, $p = 0.19$). Accordingly, lack of solidarity is the second most important problem for the middle class, but only the third for the working class.

More class differences appear when we consider other social problems. On the one hand, middle-class respondents singled out economics as the third most important obstacle (it was the case for 45% of them, compared to 28% of the working class; $t = -2.22$,



n = 150.

Fig. 1. Frequency of Modal Problems: All Respondents



n_{total} = 150. n_{mc} = 76. n_{wc} = 74.

Fig. 2. Frequency of Modal Problems: by Class

$p < 0.05$), followed by education (it was the case for 44% of them, compared to 24% of the working class; $t = -2.63, p < 0.05$). On the other hand, working-class respondents more often mentioned the breakdown of the Black family as the third modal obstacle (chosen by 44% of them, as compared to 39% of the middle class; $t = 0.66, p = 0.5$).

We now turn to qualitative analysis of the four modal themes to capture the meanings attributed to these obstacles. We focus on the top three most salient obstacles mentioned by each class group, in their order of importance, starting with racism, lack of racial solidarity, problems facing the Black family, and finally, economic problems.⁸ We will see that some of these problems have been viewed as causes for racism, thus informing our general understanding of how African Americans comprehend stigmatization.

Racism

Again, more respondents singled out racism as an important obstacle facing African Americans today than any other obstacle. They believed racism operates in many different facets of life, at both macro-institutional and micro-interactive levels. They noted the existence of institutional racism and discrimination as well as negative racial stereotypes. We explore the three most salient themes that emerge from the data: persistence of racism, racism in institutional contexts, and racist stereotypes.

Both middle- and working-class respondents discussed the continued presence of racism. They tended to understand racism not as an individual distaste for a particular racial group, but as a pervasive stigmatization that affects all African Americans over time (Wilson 1976). For example, one working-class entertainer explained that the American “power structure” was built upon racist ideologies, a predicament from which African Americans have yet to recover. He contended:

Unfortunately that’s been the problem since this country started. . . . It [is] based on racism. I say racism, people say other things. They say “slavery,” which is true. And it’s continued to be that way. There’s been a struggle with that. There’s still a struggle . . . because of the way somebody looks or acts and then they use the color issue. That’s a big, big problem. Was. And it still is.

By understanding racism as a wide-reaching contemporary phenomenon with historical roots, this entertainer, like many other respondents, placed it in a broader structural context.

Respondents also emphasized the negative consequences of institutionalized racism for opportunities. Middle-class respondents pointed to a broader range of examples of institutionalized racism than their working-class counterparts. However, both groups were equally concerned with racism and discrimination in the workforce and the criminal justice system. A male police officer commented on the negative consequences of racial preference and discrimination in the workplace:

Because of racism, whether it’s subtle or not so subtle, it tends to hold people back. You and I go in for the same job, the same qualifications. Unfortunately the White person will get that job before you or I will.

Similarly, a middle-class social worker explained that racism can limit opportunities. However, she believed that racism extends beyond the workplace and is practiced by key social institutions.

Racism is such an institution . . . Because it’s practiced [in] every aspect of life. The banking industry. The insurance industry. Everybody is getting busted. In the housing industry . . .

This concern with mainstream institutions for middle-class respondents is not surprising given that they are likely to have had more extensive interactions with a wider array of mainstream institutions than are working-class respondents—the banking and insurance industries, among others (Hochschild 1995; Pew Charitable Trust 2007; Young 2004).

Young (2004) notes that poorer African Americans de-emphasize racism in their explanations of limited mobility because of their lack of contact with those from outside their disadvantaged, segregated communities. He also notes that they tend to

provide individual-level explanations of poverty because of their limited knowledge of structural factors affecting their opportunities. In a similar fashion, we find that working-class respondents identifies a narrower range of contexts and forms of racism than middle-class respondents (Pew 2007⁹). The responses of working-class interviewees lacked the specificity of their middle-class counterparts. For example, when asked about race relations, a police officer responded, “There is subtle racism which I honestly can’t sit here and speak on because I don’t have first-hand knowledge of it.” Whether or not he has had personal experience with subtle racism, when later asked to describe the biggest obstacles facing African Americans, he replied, “Subtle racism, subtle racism.” When probed further, he simply stated, “[Racism]’s alive and well.” His vague comments confirmed his belief in the persistence of racism, but they did not provide any specific information on his perceptions of racism.

A number of respondents also believed that Whites and other groups hold negative stereotypes of Blacks. Just over 20% of all respondents expressed this concern. They believed that racist stereotypes translate into unfair treatment and hold African Americans back. Middle-class respondents were slightly more likely to discuss this aspect of racism: 55% of respondents who mentioned negative stereotypes were middle-class compared to 45% who were working-class ($t = 1.97, p = 0.05$). While many stereotypes were mentioned, a female network technician provided examples of commonly evoked, gendered stereotypes:

I keep saying that they think all Black men are thieves and thugs, and all Black women are on welfare squeezing out children, just sucking on the system. That’s what they think we are, and that’s not true. It’s not.

Similarly, a working-class male operations manager said, “Black men in particular are treated unfairly first and foremost. We are considered like the boogeyman.” When asked to expand on what it means to be a boogeyman, he said, “The big Black guy, it’s like [the] stereotype . . . He’s aggressive.” Boogeymen and welfare queens are examples of stereotypes stigmatizing African American men and women (Collins 1990). Middle-class and working-class interviewees alike provided interpretations of negative and racist stereotypes of African Americans. Both groups identified a stock of negative labels, images, and stereotypes, and pointed to the burdens they pose.

Solidarity

Middle- and working-class respondents emphasized that African Americans lack solidarity, which was a modal obstacle for the group—ranking second and third for middle-class and working-class respondents, respectively. Respondents believed that lack of solidarity has negative social, economic, and political consequences for African Americans, and compared African Americans to “crabs in the barrel” who pull one another down. In this vein, a middle-class woman who worked as an HIV counselor commented:

If somebody knows something about something, they need to share it. I find that Black people don’t help each other out as much as Latino people because [Latinos] stick together. For instance, I knew somebody that was buying a house and they got all these funds to do it and I asked the person would she help me, you know, “Point me the right direction!” And she wouldn’t!

Another respondent, a working-class female postal worker, said:

We can move into our own neighborhoods and we'll be the first one to overcharge each other. As soon as one of us buys a house, we want to . . . I call it "pillage and rape" the other person of finances. You know, not thinking of helping them . . . Sometimes we forget that we should be more unified.

In both examples, respondents focused on the negative consequences of lack of solidarity among Blacks.

Respondents were particularly concerned with class divisions within the Black community. After noting, "[African Americans] need to help one another because nobody else is going to do it. They are looking for us to fail," an African American working-class insurance salesman stated:

We always talk about other races, how they come into this country, how well they succeed. That's because they stick together. And we, as a race, don't always stick together the way we should. We don't always try to help one another. Those that tend to be successful tend to [leave] everybody else behind . . . It's a big problem, and I see it all the time.

Such comments highlight both how African Americans feel they are different from other groups as well as their thoughts about the positive aspects that solidarity engenders. They explained the lower socioeconomic status of Blacks in part by their lack of unity.

One thread that weaves through the comments can be summed up by one respondent's reflection: "We are our biggest obstacles." The second thread is the flipside of the coin: fostering solidarity could counterbalance forces that keep Blacks in subordinate positions. The third thread is that some African Americans believed that their group might do as well as other groups if they could emulate them and overcome their intraracial tensions.

Family

Scholars and politicians have repeatedly described the precarious state of the Black family as a national problem (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Furstenberg 2007; Moynihan 1965; Wilson 1987). Suffice it to mention that in 2006, only 35% of Black children lived with both parents, compared to 76% and 84% of White and Asian children, respectively. Scholars link such stratification to many social dislocations including high teen pregnancy and dropout rates (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011a). Thus it is not surprising that when probed about the obstacles facing their group, a large percentage of our sample mentioned the fragility of the Black family. It was the case for 44% of working-class respondents and 39% of middle-class respondents. Specifically, respondents identified issues related to parenting and family structure as the most problematic.

Working-class respondents were more concerned with the low parental involvement in children's lives than with any other familial problem. One woman characterized the problem as follows: "That's why [the children] are in the position they are now. Our parents are not paying attention . . . [Kids] can't do it by themselves." Another respondent was appalled when she offered a telling example of this low parental involvement:

When my son was in preschool, he went to [an] all African American and Hispanic school. We went to parent-teacher night. Me and my husband were [sic] the only parents that showed up. Out of the twenty-something kids, we were the only parents there. I have to say that's ridiculous. That's preschool . . . If [parents are] not getting involved when they're four-year-olds, what are you going to do when they turn sixteen?

Along the same lines, a male respondent believed that parents are abdicating their parental roles to hip-hop and to persons outside of the family:

That's something else about us as Blacks, we are the only race that looked to our entertainers, our ministers, to do the thinking for us. If Jay-Z don't do it, it ain't cool. Come on! Check the mom and pop of these kids . . .

As one working-class female network technician simply put it: "Children are [not] getting the basic home training they're supposed to get." Generally, respondents argued that parenting within African American families leaves much to be desired, positing that Black parents are abdicating their posts as teachers, protectors, and providers.

Middle-class respondents also focused on fragmented families and parenting problems. One woman expressed a myriad of concerns with exasperation:

[It's] a problem: babies having babies. Who is to raise these children? Where is the parent? It is not like the parents of the 1960s. We was home [sic] but now most of the homes for Blacks is one parent.

Both male and female working-class respondents connected the absence of Black men to the Black family structure (Edin and Kefalas, 2005; Wilson 1987). They spoke of Black men not fulfilling their roles: "In communities I live in, men are not available. They don't take [part] in [child] rearing." One respondent detailed women's inability to parent sons and daughters:

Fathers and mothers [of White children] are more likely going to be there. Most of the families in Black communities are raised by women, whereas in the White families, the man and the woman [are] raising the family, which has a significant impact on their upbringing of a child, because at some point you have to have a man around, especially for boys. We, as women, we can't tell our sons how to be men. We have to have a man around to do that.

Some working-class male respondents distanced themselves from the stigmatized "deadbeat dad" stereotype when speaking about problems associated with the Black family. But they also argued that such a tainted image was common in the men they saw daily. Other male respondents noted that men must do more than just be present:

To be a supporter . . . the head of the family. I'm doing that. That's very important. It's what we're lacking. The male is not in the family. It's important to me to be a model where I can share with other Black men and say, "This is our responsibility; it's your obligation to do this. You made a child? Take care of that child." Family values have declined. You have a lot of single households. You

have kids trying to raise kids. You have singles mothers trying to raise men. You have fathers trying to raise women. Or you have kids just out there trying to raise themselves. So you have all these things that's happening in our communities.

In many ways, it is not surprising that the Black family is a modal problem for working-class respondents. Fragile families are more numerous in more disadvantaged neighborhoods, similar to those which working-class respondents experience (McLanahan and Sandefur, 1994). Respondents believed that the weak family structure coupled with absent parenting erodes the fabric of African American family life and leads to the crippling of mobility options for future generations. Also, respondents again focused on perceived differences between Blacks and other racial groups. In the eyes of some, this difference marks Blacks as not only different, but also as inferior, thus contributing to the stigmatization of their group.

Economics

Respondents discussed a range of economic issues when probed on the main obstacles faced by African Americans. Thus, the economy is the fourth most frequently cited obstacle for the overall sample, and the third for middle-class respondents. Indeed, 45% of middle-class respondents mentioned economic problems when asked about the obstacles facing the Black community, making them nearly one and a half times more likely to select economic issues than their working-class counterparts. Respondents pointed to how experiences and perceptions of Black poverty and Black consumption further stigmatize a group already stigmatized by race.

Over the last several decades, we have witnessed the simultaneous growth of a Black middle class and an increase in concentrated poverty in urban centers (Wilson 1987). The precariousness of the Black middle class (Pattillo 2000) helps explain their heightened attention to economic concerns. Despite the awareness that respondents have of intraracial class differences, middle- and working-class respondents continued to discuss Blacks as one group when they discussed economic issues.

Our respondents zeroed in on four types of economic problems in this order: poverty, over-consumption or consumerism, lack of financial acumen, and lack of economic cooperation.¹⁰ While these economic problems can be investigated separately, we consider them together because it was not uncommon for respondents to discuss them in connection to one another. For example, several respondents tied issues of consumerism to a lack of economic solidarity and to class divisions, and some framed economic solidarity as a solution to Black poverty. Yet others connected economic woes to the stigmatization of their group, and held in-group members accountable for these economic problems. While working-class respondents concerned themselves with poverty related issues, middle-class respondents pointed to a wider range of economic issues, including consumerism.

Poverty

The most frequent economic problem mentioned by respondents was disproportionately high poverty rates among African Americans. In fact, just under 50% of respondents who discussed economic problems brought up poverty. Given the sense of "linked fate" among Blacks (Dawson 1994), it is not surprising that poverty was a concern for both middle- and working-class respondents. With the Black poverty rate at 27.4% in 2010 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2011b), and the African American

unemployment rate at nearly 17% (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011), economic instability is ubiquitous. Both middle- and working-class women focused on poverty more so than their male counterparts. When asked about obstacles facing Blacks, one middle-class woman asserted:

Well poverty right. Yeah, poverty is one, which includes not having access to certain resources that other races might have or they are available but a lot of people, African Americans don't know about it. Or some are just maybe too lazy to you know find out about . . . But I think, obstacles? I think laziness, ignorance, poverty is one of them. There is status, economic status. I think those, those are definitely obstacles.

This respondent focused on both behavioral (laziness, ignorance) and structural (access to resources) causes for poverty. But she mostly framed poverty as resulting from a combination of individual failure and a lack of motivation and hard work. Other respondents abstracted poverty from its structural causes and framed it as the result of individual failings, which strongly resonates with American sentiments of the deserving and undeserving poor (Gans 1995; Steensland 2006). Many viewed poverty as contributing to the stigmatization of a group that was already stigmatized by race.

Lack of Financial Acumen

In interviews, middle- and working-class men described Blacks as having little knowledge about managing their finances or investing. While working-class respondents expressed concern about the lack of financial savvy of Blacks, middle-class respondents provided more detailed reflections on this topic, and had very specific views about areas concerning which Blacks need more knowledge—areas such as investing, debt, and building credit, to name a few. Middle-class respondents, who had income to invest, would be more knowledgeable than their working-class counterparts on these topics. While one working-class man asserted, “We, as Black folk, don’t understand finance,” a middle-class man echoed this sentiment when he argued (with greater precision): “We need to understand more of our economic power, how the dollar works, how to generate money, more investments, you know?”

One middle-class investor had particularly strong views about the impact of debt on race relations. The following statement arose while discussing the American dream in which this particular respondent lamented the fact that “We own less now than we owned before.”

They have a new way of enslaving us . . . Debt . . . You go to work for them now. If you had a large credit card debt and all this kind of debt out here, who you are going to work for? You are going to work to pay all that debt . . . And they are starting to stop you from creating a whole bunch of debt by filing bankruptcy. Now they can sue your butt and, probably later on it, they will put you in jail because you borrowed all that money from them and didn't pay them back.

These concerns reflect Pattillo’s (2000) analysis of the precarious economic position of the Black middle class. Male respondents singled out lack of financial know-how as an impediment to financial progress for Blacks. This particular concern of men resonates with Lamont’s (2000) findings that providing for one’s family is an important aspect of working-class conceptions of masculinity. Interestingly, how-

ever, this concern existed for both working-class and middle-class men. Middle-class men viewed developing financial acumen as an effective strategy to combat the stigmatization associated with poverty.

Consumerism and Conspicuous Consumption

Consumerism and conspicuous consumption are two intimately connected economic obstacles discussed by respondents. Middle-class respondents were more than twice as likely as working-class respondents to mention them. They saw Black spending habits as detrimental to their group's progress. One middle-class woman explained:

Everyone is trying to get the Benz. Everybody is trying to get through the doors of Neiman Marcus. Everybody is trying to just get the biggest and the best rather than trying to figure out what's really important to move us forward. They [are] too caught up in that material crap to really look at the situation.

She viewed consumption as an issue of mistaken priorities, placing blame squarely on racial in-group members who engage in such behaviors. For his part, a middle-class man, who worked in education, expressed concerns about how mass media highlights Black consumerism. While discussing negative images of Blacks, he noted:

I am still concerned that, with mass media, the images portrayed aren't the images that I see us being. I see the average people who are working and trying to provide for their families, not out there trying to bling-bling.

By "bling-bling," he referred to the glitter, glitz, and glamour of consumer products often associated with hip-hop culture, for example. He viewed the image of Blacks as conspicuous consumers as stigmatizing and inaccurate. Conspicuous consumption is seen as a logistical impediment to saving and making financial gains, as a moral problem of misplaced priorities, as well as an issue of negative stereotyping.

CONCLUSION

Using an inductive approach, we show that racism, framed as a structural problem, is the main obstacle facing African Americans according to many of our respondents. This finding stands partially in contrast to newer research on racial attitudes and stratification beliefs (Bobo et al., Forthcoming; Hunt 1996, 2007), which shows that African Americans adopt more individual and cultural explanations of racial inequality, as opposed to structural explanations, including racism and discrimination. Indeed, our respondents tended to mix individual and structural explanations when probed about the social problems that African Americans face—particularly economic woes and the fragility of Black families.

Solidarity arises second among the obstacles frequently mentioned by our respondents. It is the second most salient problem for middle-class respondents and third for working-class respondents. Both groups singled out increasing solidarity as a useful strategy for challenging persistent racial inequalities. Drawing on examples of interracial and intraracial differences in solidarity, respondents explained the subordinate position of Blacks as partially resulting from their lack of solidarity.

Middle-class and working-class respondents diverge in the other issues they judge most important to Blacks. Whereas middle-class respondents focused on the

precarious economic position of Blacks, working-class respondents were more concerned with the fragile state of Black families. This difference, we argue, derives from their respective socioeconomic positions within the social structure and the related experiences and risks. Whereas working-class respondents are more likely to see and experience fragile families, middle-class respondents have more interactions with banks, business, and other market actors more generally. Being more highly educated, they may be more likely to worry about the lack of financial acumen of their in-group.

This study of how African Americans frame the obstacles facing their racial group provides a new perspective on how African Americans understand the situation of their group, including how they experience racial inequalities. Our inductive analysis sheds light on how African Americans connect these social problems to experiences with stigmatization, racism, and discrimination. More specifically, they connect the problems of lack of solidarity directly with the vulnerable position in which African Americans find themselves. They also zero in on economic difficulties and the fragility of Black families, connecting these issues to the experience of racism.

We contend that our investigation complements survey research concerning structural and cultural explanations of racial inequality provided by African Americans. We demonstrate that though African Americans mobilize structural explanations for the persistence of racism and sometimes advocate for group level strategies for ameliorating their group's situation (for example economic solidarity as a solution to poverty), they also turn to individual or cultural solutions for the other social problems (such as fragile Black families and building financial acumen). Additionally, our inductive approach helps us understand how African Americans connect racism, discrimination, and stigmatization to racial inequality. This study suggests that future research on stratification beliefs and racial attitudes should consider how identified problems cluster with one another.

Understanding how African Americans perceive the obstacles facing their group is also important for documenting and predicting where and when they are most likely to perceive racism and discrimination, and which types of antiracist strategies they might adopt. This study contributes to the scholarship on destigmatization and antiracism by inductively documenting how African Americans perceive their group's stigmatization. Respondents highlight racist stereotypes and the ways in which racism and discrimination operate in institutions, but they also point to stigmatization due to economic woes and the disintegration of the Black family. A broader conception of how groups understand their stigmatization points to new areas of research for destigmatization strategies.

While African Americans are increasingly depicted as a heterogeneous group (Lacy 2007; Smith and Moore, 2000; Wilson 1978), we find that despite class differences in lifestyle and experiences, there are many similarities in the obstacles with which middle- and working-class African Americans are concerned (Dawson 1994). While such commonality provides evidence that African Americans have a sense of "linked fate," our data also offer insights into the diversity of African Americans.

Today, policy makers, politicians, and the news media focus more on class issues as they reflect on the possible advent of a postracial America. Our findings demonstrate that racial stigmatization continues to be one of the most salient issues according to African Americans. Furthermore, these findings have implications for future research. In addition to class differences, subsequent analyses will explore differences along generational and gender lines, to see how they measure against class similari-

ties and differences. Future scholarship on destigmatization and antiracist strategies should pay particular attention to the connections African Americans make between racism and some of the other social problems they face, including the role of racial solidarity, issues of economics and poverty, and the fragility of the Black family.

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NOTES

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2. Names appear in alphabetical order. Authors contributed equally to this article.
3. We use the terms “Black” and “African American” interchangeably in this article, to refer both to the racial identity of respondents in the study and to the racial group to which they refer when discussing obstacles facing their group.
4. We define northern and central New Jersey as including towns such as Patterson, Irvington, South Plainfield, and South Orange.
5. Bobo et al. (Forthcoming) demonstrate a decrease in structural explanations to racial inequality among Blacks: 77% of Blacks attribute racial inequality to discrimination from 1977–1989, while only 59% do so from 2000–2008. Similarly, Bobo et al. show an increase in cultural or individual explanations: from 1977–1989 only 35% of Blacks attributed racial inequality to a lack of individual motivation or willpower, as compared to 44% from 2000–2008.
6. We restricted the sample to native-born Blacks as immigrant Blacks have different social experiences (Smith and Moore, 2000; Waters 1999).
7. Modal obstacles were calculated so as to give each respondent equal weight: numbers refer to the total number of respondents who mention a particular obstacle, as opposed to the total number of times a particular obstacle was mentioned.
8. Education is nearly as important for middle-class respondents as economics. However, we decided to limit our investigation to the three most cited problems for each class group.
9. Pew (2007) writes that better educated Blacks report facing more discrimination than less educated Blacks. Of college educated Blacks, 75% report discrimination in the job market, as compared to 61% of Blacks with a high school diploma. Similar patterns hold for the housing market.
10. See the “solidarity” section for a discussion of the lack of economic cooperation among African Americans.

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