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**Race, Gender, and Class at Work: Examining Cultural Capital
and Inequality in a Corporate Workplace**

A Dissertation Submitted to the

Division of Research and Advanced Studies
of the University of Cincinnati

in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

in the Department of Sociology
of the McMicken College of Arts and Sciences

2007

by

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ABSTRACT

Cultural capital refers to the role certain cultural practices, knowledge, attitudes, and abilities play in the reproduction of social class. This concept has emerged as a powerful framework for the study of inequality and the intersection of structure and agency. Previous research has focused primarily on the effects of cultural capital on the educational outcomes of adolescents, and has paid much less attention to cultural capital's importance in social contexts involving adults. Further, research in this area has been concerned mainly with the role of social class, while neglecting issues of race and gender.

This study uses data gathered from extensive personal interviews and participant observation at Aimco, a multinational corporation headquartered in the Midwest, to examine three main research questions involving cultural capital, race, gender, and class. First, I document the specific forms of cultural capital that are valued at Aimco, and discuss the advantages gained by employees who possess and activate their cultural capital. In doing so, I explain why cultural capital is an appropriate theoretical framework for the study of race and gender inequality in the workplace, despite having rarely been applied in this manner.

Second, I argue that cultural capital theory is appropriate for the study of racial inequality, and examine how race affects Aimco employees' possession and activation of cultural capital at work. I find a significant intersection of race and class, as Aimco's white-dominated culture privileges white middle-class employees and disadvantages black middle-class employees. Third, I discuss how Aimco's dominant informal culture is gendered and affects the career prospects of men and women differently. In particular, I focus on how gender differences in cultural capital contribute to the maintenance of the glass ceiling that limits the upward mobility of women in the corporate sector.

I conclude with a discussion of future research possibilities, and a call for more research into the effects of race, gender, and class on cultural capital-related processes within organizations and other social contexts involving adults.

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In memory of Edward V. “Mickey” Purcell (1921-1990).
You set the standard for love, generosity, and hard work.
I hope I have made you proud.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This is the fun part: the defense is over and the revisions are complete. I am now in Akron, where in a few short weeks, I will begin a new chapter as an Assistant Professor at Kent State University.

I first dreamed of being a professor in 1998, during my senior year at Thomas More College. I entered the sociology program at the University of Cincinnati in Fall 1993 and departed for Loyola University-Chicago after defending my MA thesis in 1995. I left Loyola after less than a year of doctoral study, recognizing that a variety of circumstances would keep me from concentrating fully on being a graduate student. I reentered UC's program in Fall 2003. It has been a long trip and I am ecstatic to finally be here, writing these notes, reflecting, and giving thanks.

First and foremost, I want to thank my wife, Amy. No one has given more generously or believed in me more strongly than Amy. She deferred her own dreams of novel writing to support mine, worked long hours as the primary breadwinner, and never balked at the sacrifices of money and time that doctoral study demanded of us. In addition, she read and commented on every paper draft, and tolerated my frequent interruptions of otherwise pleasant times with ideas I had to write or think-out-loud about immediately. I would absolutely not be here without her support. Thanks, love.

My dissertation committee members – Jennifer Malat (co-chair), Rhys Williams (co-chair), and Dave Maume – have been outstanding in their support, advice, and guidance. They challenged me as a sociologist, supported me as a job candidate, and prepared me well for my career. Along the way, they helped make me a better person. I consider myself fortunate to have them on my side and to count them as friends, and these brief words can hardly do justice to the depth of my gratitude.

Four years after I shyly introduced myself to Jennifer and asked for independent study hours, I leave with a mentor, advisor, colleague, co-author, and role model (all deals should work out so well!). It is hard to imagine where I would be without her sociological wisdom, guidance, and generous support. I look especially forward to our planned research collaborations.

I have gone from being intimidated by Rhys to counting him as a mentor. He has never hesitated to challenge me, and his senior-level advice on a range of issues – particularly in terms of culture, theory, qualitative research, and the ways of academia – has been invaluable. I look forward to many years of his wisdom.

I go back the longest with Dave, who served as my MA thesis chair in the mid-90s, and often served as a personal reference during my career in the corporate sector. Dave is the very model of a motivated, rigorous scholar, and I especially thankful for his quantitative research advice and support on the job market.

I am indebted to other professors in the department as well: to Anna Linders, Dave Lundgren, and Sarah Beth Estes for their early encouragement and support; to Paula Dubeck, Neal Ritchey, and Steve Carlton-Ford for the warm welcome they gave the prodigal son; and to Jeff Timberlake and Kelly Moore for their friendship and advice. In addition, thanks to Cheryl Lindsey and Linda Kocher for their assistance and kindness.

My grad student mates provided much-needed support and friendship. A special thank you goes out to Joe Michael, my kindred spirit and traveling companion – I'll look forward to your

defense, bro. Thanks also to Aaron Howell, Ryan Cragun (especially for going through the dissertation/job market grind at the same time), Lisa Fisher, and Jaita Talukdar.

I owe a number of people a note of gratitude for various reasons: our families, especially my Mother, sister (Mary), and brother-in-law (Rock); Alice & Macy; Annette Lareau; Tom VanderVen; David VanZytveld; Sean Rhiney; our beautiful circle of friends; John Coltrane; Mike Scott & The Waterboys; the Wednesday night hoops gang; Pam Wilcox; Babo; and last, but certainly not least, all of the kind Aimco employees who gave generously of their time and insight.

Last, I would like to thank the Taft Research Center and the Kunz Center for the Study of Work and Family for their financial support.

"The things that matter most must never be at the mercy of things that matter least."
– Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Chapter One: Introduction | 1 |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| A note on the format | 1 |
| Personal background to the study | 1 |
| Evolution of the project | 3 |
| Research questions..... | 5 |
| Chapter Two: “You Have To Play”: Examining Cultural Capital and Inequality at Work..... | 7 |
| Introduction..... | 7 |
| Background..... | 9 |
| Ascriptive inequality in the workplace | 9 |
| Race, gender, and sociocultural interactions at work | 11 |
| Cultural capital theory..... | 17 |
| Cultural capital theory and workplace inequality | 20 |
| Methods..... | 26 |
| Defining the research questions and concepts | 26 |
| Site, access, and data..... | 26 |
| Culture and context at Aimco | 31 |
| Results..... | 33 |
| Overview..... | 33 |
| Knowledge about informal expectations | 34 |
| Participating in and navigating social events..... | 37 |
| Being a cultural omnivore..... | 43 |
| Converting cultural capital into advantage | 45 |
| Chapter Three: Race at Work: Cultural Capital and the Reproduction of Racial Inequality | 51 |
| Introduction..... | 51 |
| Background..... | 52 |
| Racial theories of inequality | 52 |
| Cultural capital theory..... | 53 |
| Cultural capital and race | 55 |
| Racial inequality in the workplace..... | 57 |
| Research questions..... | 63 |
| Additional methods notes | 63 |
| Culture and race at Aimco | 64 |
| Defining cultural capital at work | 65 |
| Results..... | 67 |
| Overview..... | 67 |
| Middle-class blacks at Aimco | 68 |
| Management: how are boundaries drawn? | 73 |
| Employees: an example of the “X factor” | 76 |
| Working-class blacks at Aimco | 79 |
| White employees at Aimco..... | 82 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Experiencing Aimco's white-dominated culture | 84 |
| Discussion | 88 |
| Chapter Four: Inside The Boys' Club: Gender and Cultural Capital at Work..... | 94 |
| Introduction..... | 94 |
| Background | 95 |
| Gender inequality in management | 95 |
| The path to the glass ceiling..... | 97 |
| Homosocial reproduction and the glass ceiling | 100 |
| Cultural capital theory..... | 105 |
| Cultural capital and gender | 107 |
| Cultural capital and gender at work..... | 110 |
| Research questions..... | 111 |
| Results..... | 112 |
| Gender at Aimco | 112 |
| Aimco's glass ceiling..... | 114 |
| Cultural capital at Aimco | 116 |
| Cultural capital and gender at Aimco | 117 |
| Experiencing Aimco's male-dominated informal culture..... | 120 |
| Cultural capital and the glass ceiling at Aimco | 124 |
| Cultural capital and the glass ceiling: an example of disadvantage..... | 128 |
| Exceptions to the rule: cultural tastes and dispositions | 129 |
| Discussion | 133 |
| Chapter Five: Conclusion | 139 |
| Conclusion | 139 |
| Sociological contributions | 139 |
| Cultural capital and meritocracy | 142 |
| Limitations | 143 |
| Policy recommendations | 144 |
| Future research..... | 146 |
| Appendix A: Distribution of Participants | 148 |
| References..... | 149 |

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION

A note on the format

Before I introduce this dissertation, I want to briefly explain the format. My committee graciously allowed me to write this project as three journal-ready papers rather than a traditional dissertation (with an introduction, literature review, methods section, etc.) that would need to be deconstructed later into journal submissions. This will enable me to submit this project to peer-reviewed journals more quickly and efficiently than if I had written a traditional dissertation. That said, this project still contains an overall introduction (this section) and conclusion, as well as a separate methods section, as there was no need to repeat the reporting of the methods multiple times.

Personal background to the study

Sixteen years ago, I was a 25-year-old computer programmer at a major publisher of collegiate textbooks and software. I enjoyed my work and had good relationships with my coworkers, but two things often made me feel out of step at the company. First, I was from a working-class family while many of my coworkers were from more privileged backgrounds. They had attended elite schools, studied abroad, and had parents who were white-collar professionals. Navigating the corporate culture seemed to come easy to them, while I learned things the hard way, through trial and error. It was the first time I truly became aware of the meanings of my class background.

The second thing that affected my fit with the company's culture was the fact that I was perhaps the most visibly free-spirited employee there, given that I had long hair, drove a 1974 VW Microbus, and had Greenpeace posters on my office door. Despite the fact that I reported directly to a vice-president and received excellent performance reviews, people outside of my department were often wary of relying on me for projects. One vice-president asked me to get him coffee before a meeting, unaware that I was there to lead the meeting. I came to realize that I had less margin for error than most other employees.

One particular incident awakened me to the existence and importance of the company's culture. There was a group of white men in middle management who avoided working with me if they could help it. There was quite a bit of social distance between us: they were in their 30s, had attended good colleges and belonged to fraternities, played golf together regularly, and drove BMWs. In short, they thought I was a freak. That is, until one afternoon, when I overheard them discussing sports trivia. Whatever the obscure question was that they were considering, I knew the answer – and they were shocked by this. This led to more discussions of sports, and eventually, invitations to play basketball and golf with them. Before long, they were a part of my work network, and I could rely on them for support and advice; likewise, they came to me for my expertise on computer matters. In addition, my margin of error with employees outside of my department increased significantly, and my free-spirited nature was viewed as fun and eccentric, rather than unprofessional.

Two years later, I left my job to begin the Master's program in sociology at the University of Cincinnati. I thought often about my work experiences as I eventually narrowed my main research interests down to questions of inequality and culture, and did my Master's thesis research on the effects of racial segregation in cultural activities on whites' racial attitudes. I

returned to the corporate sector for several years, working in both Chicago and Cincinnati. I regularly observed the culture of the several companies I worked for, as well as how race, class, and gender mattered in these workplaces. In Fall 2003, I returned to the University of Cincinnati to continue my doctoral studies. That brings me to this project.

Evolution of the project

I became interested in Pierre Bourdieu's work on cultural capital during my first stint in graduate school, and was reacquainted with this literature upon my return to doctoral studies. Jennifer Malat introduced me to the work of Annette Lareau (2000; 2003), who has done some of the most compelling work in cultural capital research, particularly in terms of class and race differences in this form of capital. The work of Lareau and her colleagues continues to be a tremendous influence on my sociological thinking, and I was fortunate to discuss this project with her in person while I was still forming my ideas.

My initial plan for this project was to merge my interests in cultural capital and racial segregation in the sociocultural domain. I planned to explore how racial differences in cultural interests outside of the workplace affected employees at a large corporation. In my corporate experience, the interests and preferences of whites generally dominated the corporate culture. Anecdotal evidence suggested that blacks and whites lead segregated lives in social and cultural terms – i.e., they often have different cultural preferences and frequent distinct sociocultural spaces. Thus, my original working hypothesis was that this external cultural segregation would be reflected and replicated inside the workplace, disadvantaging blacks, and providing advantages to whites, in cultural capital terms. While there was no literature that directly addressed this question, studies by several influential researchers suggested that I was on the

right track (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Carter 2003; Feagin 2000; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2000; 2003; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

Two important methodological decisions helped advance the project. I decided to collect original data, rather than try to shoehorn my research questions into an existing data set. I also chose to study this qualitatively, with extensive personal interviews and participant-observations, rather than with a quantitative survey. I wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how cultural capital is valued and used *inside* an institution like the workplace; I also wanted to gain more qualitative research experience before leaving graduate school. Both decisions turned out to be the right ones, especially given that my research focus changed as the project moved forward.

My research questions began to evolve as I conducted pilot interviews and my initial forays into participant-observation in summer 2005, and three things became readily apparent. First, I realized that documenting and defining the dominant culture (and recognizing that there was, in fact, a predominant culture) of Aimco, the corporation under study, was an important empirical task in and of itself; a paper by Lamont and Lareau (1988) influenced me greatly in this regard. Much of the extant literature presumed what constituted cultural capital in their research settings – instead, I explored this question. Second, I recognized the effect of class, particularly in regard to how some Aimco employees were unaware of the importance of the company's informal culture. Third, the importance of gender became so clear that I had no choice but to expand my study to include it. As late as Fall 2006, I was still considering postponing an analysis of the gender data until after I completed this dissertation, but the findings were ultimately too compelling to put off any longer.

Research questions

This project, while covering a wide range of sociological territory, attempts to answer three sets of research questions that correspond with the three substantive chapters (or journal-ready papers). Along the way, it asks important questions about how individuals are evaluated according to the informal standards of an institution. The first paper, “‘You Have To Play’: Examining Cultural Capital and Inequality at Work,” documents the specific forms of cultural capital that are valued at Aimco, and illustrates how employees who possess this type of capital convert it into advantage. In the process, this paper states the case for why cultural capital is an appropriate theoretical framework for the study of race and gender inequality in the workplace, despite it having been rarely applied in this manner. The first paper also contains this project’s entire methods section.

The second paper, “Race at Work: Cultural Capital and the Reproduction of Racial Inequality,” demonstrates how cultural capital theory is appropriate for the study of racial inequality. This paper is closest to the project’s original research questions in that it examines how race affects individuals’ possession and activation of cultural capital in the workplace, and how some employees are disadvantaged or advantaged in this regard. It also addresses the intersection of race and class in Aimco’s informal culture.

“Inside The Boys’ Club: Gender And Cultural Capital At Work” is the title of the third substantive paper. It examines how Aimco’s dominant culture is gendered, and how this culture affects the career prospects of men and women differently. In particular, this paper focuses on how gender differences in cultural capital contribute to the maintenance of the glass ceiling that limits the upward mobility of women in the corporate sector.

In the three substantive chapters, the reader will find three common themes regarding my use of cultural capital in this project. First, I contend that cultural capital offers a powerful framework for the study of inequality that enables researchers to consider both structure *and* agency. Second, I demonstrate that this framework is useful for identifying the *mechanisms* that underlie the reproduction of race, gender, and class inequality inside an institution at the everyday, interactional level. Third, I argue that cultural capital provides more explanatory power than the frameworks, such as homophily and stereotyping, that are usually employed in this type of research.

The dissertation closes with a discussion of this study's sociological contributions, the implications for future research, and a few concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO: “YOU HAVE TO PLAY”: EXAMINING CULTURAL CAPITAL AND INEQUALITY AT WORK

“Look, I have two things against me coming in the door: I’m black and I’m a female. So I get a lot out of it. You can obtain a lot of information outside of work.”

– Etta, an older, black woman who participated in this study

INTRODUCTION

Ascriptive inequality in the American work sector is well-documented. Over the past three decades, hundreds of studies have found significant racial and gender disparities in wages, employment opportunities, and various forms of work-related attainment. Generally speaking, white men are given better opportunities, face fewer barriers to advancement, and are more handsomely rewarded than white women, black women, and black men (e.g., Acker 2006; Browne and Misra 2003; Maume 1999; Reskin 2000; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993a). The majority of this research concerns allocative questions, focusing on the social forces that influence the distribution of jobs, wages, and promotions, such as occupational segregation (Maume 1999), differences in job seekers’ social capital (Smith 2005), or discrimination at the hiring stage (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991).

Much less attention has been paid to internal mechanisms, particularly the processes of social interaction that underlie work inequality. The majority of the research that considers social and cultural interactions in the workplace generally does not focus on disparities and neglects to situate these processes in a broader theoretical framework of inequality (e.g., Harper and Lawson 2003; Hodson 2004). However, studies that link ascriptive inequality in the workplace to social processes such as homophily and social closure (Kanter 1977) suggest that sociocultural interactions at work are worth a deeper investigation.

In this paper, I use cultural capital as a framework for examining ascriptive inequality in a corporate workplace. Cultural capital refers to the role certain cultural knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, and abilities play in the reproduction of social class, and has emerged as a powerful concept for studying inequality and the intersection of structure and agency (Bourdieu 1984). Previous research has focused on the effects of cultural capital in educational settings, and has paid little attention to the importance of this form of capital in the workplace. Significantly, sociologists who research cultural capital (Lamont and Lareau 1988) and work (Reskin 2003; Vallas 2003) have called for more studies of this very type.

I seek to accomplish three goals in this paper. First, I discuss why cultural capital is an appropriate theoretical framework for the study of ascriptive inequality in the workplace, despite the fact that it has rarely been applied in this manner. Second, I use interview and participant-observation data to uncover the specific forms of cultural capital that are valued at Aimco, a major, multinational corporation headquartered in the Midwest. Third, I discuss how some employees activate valued cultural capital and convert it into advantage, particularly in regard to increased social capital and greater opportunities for advancement.

This paper is part of a larger ethnographic project that explores the roles played by race, gender, class, and culture in the reproduction of inequality in the corporate workplace. In other words, what advantages are gained by those with greater amounts of cultural capital that is valued in this particular setting, and how do employees with less of this cultural capital risk falling behind? How do race, gender, and class affect these processes? By examining the role of cultural capital in a major corporation, this paper adds considerable insight into the mechanisms *inside the workplace* that lead to the reproduction of inequality. This paper also contributes to the

literature on cultural capital by extending this framework into a context where it has rarely been applied, and by identifying forms of cultural capital that are valued in a specific, local setting.

BACKGROUND

Ascriptive inequality in the workplace

Sociologists have reported extensively on racial and gender inequality in the American labor market and the workplace. In general, black women, black men, and white women do more poorly than white men in terms of wages, promotions, supervisory opportunities, and workplace power and authority (Elliott and Smith 2004; Maume 1999; 2004a; b; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Smith 2001; Smith 2002; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993a; Wilson 1997), and are still prone to facing hostility and discrimination in the workplace (Anderson 1999; Coombs and King 2005; Feagin and McKinney 2003; Kaplan 2006; Pierce 2003; Roth 2004b; Simpson and Cohen 2004).

Women and black men are less likely than white men to have mentors and to have mentor relationships that end positively (Ragins and Scandura 1997; Ragins and Cotton 1991), and are likely to receive lower performance ratings from their supervisors than white men (Ilgen and Youtz 1986; Kraiger and Ford 1985). Further, women and blacks are often channeled into racialized or gendered jobs, positions that are frequently marginalized and devalued because they are not occupied predominantly by white men (Collins 1997b; Kilbourne, England, and Beron 1994; Williams 2004). Even in the face of arguments that privilege class in explanations of work-related inequality (Bonacich and John 1980; Burawoy 1982; Rosenfeld 1980; Wilson 1978; Wright 1997), it is clear that race and gender disparities remain within the workplace.

The majority of the literature on race and gender inequality at work focuses on the structural forces that influence the distribution of jobs, wages, chances for supervisory positions, and promotions. Researchers have identified many important factors that partially explain various forms of ascriptive inequality at work, including job- and occupation-level segregation (Acker 2006; Bielby and Baron 1986; Maume 1999; Reskin 1993), organizational composition (Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999), job availability in urban centers for black men and black women (Holzer, Danziger, O'Connor, Tilly, and Bobo 2001; Wilson 1987), firms' hiring strategies (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991), and job seekers' social networks and social capital (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006; Smith 2005). However, while much is known about ascriptive inequality and work from an aggregate standpoint, significantly less is known about the mechanisms internal to the workplace that affect the production of inequality (Vallas 2003).

Quantitative studies have yielded many important insights about ascriptive disparities in the workplace, but have been unable to identify social and interactional processes that affect the unequal distribution of work-related rewards. Researchers are often left to infer important relational processes indirectly because of their use of survey-based data (Reskin 2003; Vallas 2003). Thus, we know little about how work inequality is produced at the interactional level, nor do we have much information about the locally produced structures of knowledge that are valued in the workplace. Leading scholars in the sociology of work and organizations have criticized this predominantly macro focus and have called for more innovative, qualitative approaches that account for interactional, microsocial relations at work (Collins 1997a; Cornfield, Kane, Whitfield, and Strauss 1998; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Elliott and Smith 2004; Reskin 2003; Vallas 2003).

Barbara Reskin (2003) noted in her 2002 American Sociological Association Presidential Address that sociology has learned much about why ascriptive inequality in the workplace exists, but has failed to explain how it is produced. In other words, we know relatively little about how race and gender are “done” or performed (Jackson 2001; West and Zimmerman 1987) at work, and how those performances might influence workplace interactions and workers’ opportunities for inclusion, success, and advancement; we also know little about the intersectionality of race, gender, and class in this regard (Acker 2006). Reskin used her platform to call for a greater emphasis on the mechanisms behind ascriptive inequality.

While echoing Reskin’s theme, Vallas (2003) summarizes three reasons why such explanations have been neglected.¹ The first is methodological, as quantitative methods have generally been emphasized over qualitative methods. The second is theoretical: sociologists of work and organizations have increasingly focused on external factors rather than forces internal to organizations. The third is practical, as corporations may be less likely to grant access to sociological researchers due to a fear of litigation, particularly when race and gender are involved. This paper, by taking a qualitative look inside the workplace, helps correct for this gap in the research and identifies an important set of mechanisms that facilitate the reproduction of inequality.

Race, gender, and sociocultural interactions at work

Despite the relative lack of research on mechanisms of inequality inside the workplace, studies on two social psychological processes point to the confluence of race, gender, and sociocultural interactions as key mechanisms. The first is homophily, the tendency for people to

¹ Vallas discusses this reasons in the context of racial inequality at work, but they clearly apply to research on gender inequality at work as well.

associate with people like themselves (for an excellent review, see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Research on corporate culture and organizations underscores the importance of homophily and cultural matching at work. Kanter's (1977) classic study, for example, found that corporate managers responded to increasing uncertainty and a need for rapid communication in decision-making by placing a premium on trust and predictability among their hires. To maximize these traits, managers sought to hire employees similar to themselves socially and culturally. This created a cycle of social closure (Weber 1978) leading to the exclusion of those seen as different or unpredictable, which included women and minorities. Other workplace studies have supported Kanter's findings on homophily (Bielby and Bielby 1992; Erickson, Albanese, and Drakulic 2000; Ibarra 1997; Roth 2004a; b). Organizations also respond to uncertainty with mimetic isomorphism, or the tendency to model the structures and decisions of similar organizations – this also leads to homogeneity in organizational structures (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Further, research on homophily finds that workplace social networks tend to have a high degree of homogeneity in terms of race, gender, class, and sociocultural factors (Anderson 1999; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001; Stuber 2005). Social familiarity affects success within the workplace, particularly in situations where social ties are important for the accumulation of knowledge and skills (Blair-Loy 2001). In addition, research finds that race, gender and sociocultural interests play important roles in the formation of social networks that, in turn, lead to workplace achievement and the opportunity to acquire power and authority (Elliott and Smith 2004; Ibarra 1995; McGuire 2002).

Second, research on the related processes of stereotypes, stigma, and status expectations also underscores the effects of race and gender in workplace interactions. This work considers the

consequences, meanings, and identities of race and gender that are produced through social interactions in corporate settings (e.g., Browne and Misra 2003; Ridgeway 1997). Both the context – i.e., corporations led mainly by white men, with cultures that are dominated primarily by the preferences and interests of white men (Bell and Nkomo 2001) – and the interactional processes of the workplace are important.

Anderson (1999), in an ethnographic study of black executives employed by a major financial corporation in Philadelphia, finds that black executives struggle with stigmatized identities in their workplace. Stigma is produced through social interactions between the stigmatized and those who have the power to assign stigma (Becker 1973). As a result of their stigmatized positions, black executives are often left feeling alienated, isolated, disillusioned, and insecure (Anderson 1999). Similarly, constraints on the mobility of black executives are produced in workplace processes and interactions (Collins 1997a; b). Collins reports that black executives are likely to be promoted into racialized management positions – jobs with responsibilities that include a connection to black communities or issues, or to government civil rights agencies – and that new black managers in predominantly white corporations are directed into racialized career tracks via a combination of corporate pressure, career naiveté, and their perceptions of racial corporate barriers (Collins 1997a; b). These findings clearly indicate that race affects the interactions of blacks in the corporate workplace via key social psychological processes.

The impact of gender in workplace interactions is similarly well-established (Fuchs Epstein 1992; Ridgeway 1997; Ridgeway and Correll 2000; Ridgeway and Smith-Lovin 1999). Women routinely face gender-based stereotypes and status beliefs in their daily workplace interactions (Acker 2006; Pierce 1995; Roth 2004b). A study of law firms, for example, found that women

paralegals were expected to display “typical” female traits such as being mothering and supportive, while their male peers were seen as more serious candidates to be junior partners (Pierce 1995). Similar research finds women lawyers to be penalized for violating gender boundaries in work interactions (Fuchs Epstein 1992). Gendered interactions may lead to white men excluding women from important discussions or informal gatherings, or including their feedback on workplace issues (Acker 2006). Pierce’s (1995) work also gets at the thorny issue of intersectionality, as she notes how certain positions were both gendered and racialized; related research supports the effects of intersectionality at work (Acker 2006; Browne and Misra 2003).

Notably, leading scholars concerned with examining mechanisms in work and ascriptive inequality argue for the significance of homophily and stereotyping (and related processes) in recent theoretical papers. Reskin (2002; 2003) blames unrecognized homophilous processes, more so than the malicious actions of white males, for workplace inequality. Ridgeway (1997; 2006), on the other hand, focuses on interactional processes involving stereotypes, sex categorization, and status expectations, and sees social interaction as “the invisible hand” that reproduces systemic inequalities in the workplace. Acker (2006) recognizes the importance of both types of processes. While these arguments, and the research supporting them, are powerful, they suffer from three limitations.

First and most significantly, arguments based on homophily and stereotyping overlook a significant component at the meso-level of social interactions: i.e., what is the substance and the context of interactions? Put simply, *what* are people at work talking about and *where* are they interacting? Studies on homophily and stereotyping neglect discussion of the social and cultural substance of workplace interactions, leaving the impression of individuals who act and respond

only according to race- and gender-based characteristics.² However, Erickson (1996) suggests that these questions are important, finding popular, mainstream culture to be important for connecting employees across class and managerial/hierarchical boundaries. Further, research has shown that popular culture and the arts play an important role in how people connect with one another (DiMaggio 1987; Feld 1981; Fiske 1987; Lizardo 2006). This is particularly important given that research finds social networks to be unstable and fluid (Burt 2000; Wellman, Yuk-lin Wong, Tindall, and Nazer 1997), and less tied to traditional communities than previously (Castells 1996; Wellman and Wortley 1990).

Further, by not considering the substance and context of workplace interactions, this literature treats white men, white women, and blacks as homogenous groups. By claiming that workplace inequality is driven by the desire of white males to hire and promote workers “like themselves,” this literature implicitly assumes the homogeneity of white men. But this is obviously not the case, as any number of factors – e.g., social class, sexuality, education, social and cultural interests, family of origin, context of interaction, and internal competition for scarce resources and opportunities – can cause differences between white men regardless of their common traits of whiteness and maleness. The factors that bias white men toward other white men are left unsaid. By not delving into the “stuff” of workplace interactions, what is left is straightforward discrimination that is based solely on race and gender, the very explanation that some authors in this area are trying to move beyond (e.g., Reskin 2002); even scholars concerned with basic discrimination are better served by understanding the mechanisms discussed here.

² Kanter (1977) briefly touched on the importance of social activities at Indsco, but did not examine them at a more meaningful level.

Second, on a substantive level, these arguments fail to explain the successes of some women and black men in the corporate world. Although, women and black men are still disadvantaged in the workplace compared to white men, it is clear that many succeed, and research suggests possible signs of progress for women (Goodman, Fields, and Blum 2003) and black men (Maume 2004a) in terms of management positions. Studies on the “glass ceiling” that restricts women and blacks from executive positions at least indicates their presence in higher levels of management (Cotter, Hermsen, Ovadia, and Vanneman 2001; Maume 2004a). Further, recent research finds promise in certain types of diversity programs that are effective in increasing the percentage of black women, white women, and black men in management positions (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). Arguments based on homophily and stereotyping processes do not comment on these findings; a rare exception relies primarily on individual-level strategies to explain the success of some white women on Wall Street (Roth 2004a; b).

Third, this literature, by focusing primarily on the micro-level of interactions, struggles to offer a critique of the reproduction of inequality in the workplace at a structural level. In terms of the classic structure-agency debate within sociology, this literature leans heavily on agency. Structural issues are generally explained by way of organization composition (Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999) and/or the numerical imbalances that result in tokenism (Roth 2006). Certainly, processes that result in homophily and stereotyping imply a broader structural bent – after all, race and gender stereotypes are rooted in structural inequality – but larger issues of social class, exclusion, and power, as well as the interplay between structure and agency, are neglected.³

³ Ridgeway (2006) recently published a theoretical piece arguing for a stronger linking of social structure and interpersonal behavior.

In short, while the workplace inequality literature on homophily and stereotyping processes is significant, it remains flawed by the limitations noted above. Its explanatory power is weakened by not detailing the mechanisms that underlie racialized and gendered interactions at work. This is noteworthy at a time when discriminatory processes in the workplace are increasingly subtle and harder to document (Acker 2006). By striving to understand how homophilous, racialized, and gendered processes are enacted and achieved, we can obtain a better understanding of their proximate outcomes, and work toward programs and procedures that may be used to overcome them. In the next section, I explain why cultural capital is a more powerful framework for examining these issues and understanding these processes within a broader theory of inequality.

Cultural capital theory

The concept of cultural capital was developed by Pierre Bourdieu as part of a larger framework that analyzed the reproduction of class-based power and privilege, and examined how culture impacts processes of inequality. Bourdieu created a dynamic model that sought to reconcile the relationship between structure and agency, and stressed issues of power, domination, conflict, and legitimation. Bourdieu emphasized the importance of three forms of capital: social, economic, and cultural. This highlighted culture as a form of capital worthy of analysis and not purely reducible to economic means (Bourdieu 1984; 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

While cultural capital has been operationalized in many ways, it generally refers to the role that cultural knowledge, tastes, practices, dispositions, attitudes, and goods play in the reproduction of social class and inequality (Bourdieu 1984; 2001; Lamont and Lareau 1988;

Lareau 2003; Swartz 1997).⁴ In mainstream institutions, valued cultural capital reflects the values of the dominant class. For example, Bourdieu argued in one of his landmark works that French schools are not neutral, meritocratic institutions where students succeed through performance – rather, schools favor the cultural tastes and practices of middle- and upper-class students (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). The cultural capital French students were rewarded for included linguistic skills (including grammar and accent), knowledge about informal academic culture, and an appreciation for the arts and humanities. Students from privileged backgrounds enter school with advantages in these areas, and are rewarded for this type of aptitude. Because differences in academic achievement are explained in terms of ability rather than class background or cultural resources, the success of privileged students – as well as the larger processes of the reproduction of inequality – are legitimized (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Lareau (2003) and Lewis (2003) found similar results in the American grade school system.

Cultural capital has grown in popularity in American sociology over the past 20 years. Although the majority of this work examines the reproduction of inequality in the educational system (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; DiMaggio 1982; Eitle and Eitle 2002; Lareau 2000; 2003; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999), this framework has also been applied to exploring the effects of cultural capital in other areas including marital selection (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985), the legal system (Kinsey and Stalans 1999), and cultural production (Bielby 2004). I am aware of just a few studies, to be discussed shortly, that apply this theoretical

⁴ Bourdieu (2001) distinguished between three types of cultural capital: (1) embodied, which includes attitudes, preferences, and practices that are learned and/or heavily influenced by one's socialization; (2) objectified, which includes concrete goods (books, artwork, etc.) that require embodied cultural capital to understand and appreciate; and (3) institutionalized, which refers to degrees or diplomas that verify or support one's embodied cultural capital. This research focuses almost entirely on embodied cultural capital – a further breakdown of this form into more specific sub-forms makes for an excellent direction for future research.

framework to the workplace (Davies-Netzley 1998; Erickson 1996; Kaplan 2006; Kay and Hagan 1998; Stuber 2005).

But *what is* cultural capital? In terms of operationalizing the concept, most American research followed the example set by DiMaggio's 1982 and 1985 articles that examined the effects of cultural capital on school success and other educational outcomes (see Lareau and Weininger 2003 for an excellent overview of research on cultural capital and education). DiMaggio defined cultural capital in terms of elite, highbrow arts and culture, using items that measured if students had participated in the arts (created visual arts or performed in public), read literature, or visited art museums or the symphony (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). However, this definition has been criticized by Lareau and her colleagues for being too narrow and somewhat of a misappropriation of Bourdieu's original work – in particular, they contend that Bourdieu may have meant for elite, highbrow culture to apply only to considerations of French society (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

Significantly, the possession of cultural capital is not enough. Cultural capital is a resource that must be *activated* by individuals in social interactions. Merely possessing a form of cultural capital is of little use if an actor cannot activate it in social contexts in an appropriate manner. It is perhaps of most use when it is activated in interactions with the gatekeepers or decision-makers in a given social context. For example, demonstrating one's knowledge of juggling is unlikely to impress a corporate vice-president in most circumstances, as it is doubtful that this type of culture is valued in a corporate setting. Similarly, discussing the latest *Wall Street Journal* headlines with a clerical employee is unlikely to facilitate the conversion of one's cultural capital into additional resources. Thus, actors must skillfully activate their cultural capital at the right times, in the right places, and

in front of the right people. A card game is a helpful analogy here: i.e., having a good hand of cards is of no value if one does not know how to play the cards skillfully according to the rules of the particular game being played (Bourdieu 1976; Lamont and Lareau 1988).

Lareau and colleagues stress that the content of cultural capital must be defined in a given context before its effects can be analyzed. Lamont and Lareau (1988) contend that “documenting the socially and historically specific forms of American cultural capital is now an urgent empirical task.” Further, Lareau and her colleagues argue that cultural capital studies must identify: (1) the specific expectations by which individuals in a context are evaluated (students and families, in Lareau’s case), with an emphasis on informal methods of evaluation; (2) the cultural resources individuals possess and activate in order to meet institutional expectations; and (3) the variations among individuals to meet institutional expectations based on their social location in the stratification system (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003). This paper differs from the vast majority of cultural capital studies by investigating, rather than presuming, the relevant content of cultural capital in the context that is being researched.

As Lareau and Weininger (2003:587) summarize this approach, “the critical aspect of cultural capital is that it allows culture to be used as a resource that provides access to scarce rewards, is subject to monopolization, and under certain conditions, may be transmitted from one generation to the next.”

Cultural capital theory and workplace inequality

Three particular aspects of cultural capital – as originated by Bourdieu and modified by Lareau, Lamont, and Erickson (Bourdieu 1984; 2001; Erickson 1996; Lamont and Lareau 1988;

Lareau 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2003) –make it an appropriate and compelling framework for examining the mechanisms underlying ascriptive inequality at work.

First, this research demonstrates that success in institutions such as the educational system cannot be completely attributed to meritocracy and quantifiable performance (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2003). Rather, actors are rewarded for meeting institutional standards and possessing certain dispositions and proficiencies, all of which are heavily influenced by class, race, and gender. Importantly, workplace success is not entirely based on quantifiable performance – rather, relevant cultural competencies enable some employees to succeed or be evaluated in a more positive light, while the lack thereof disadvantages other employees (Erickson 1996; Kanter 1977; Kaplan 2006; Stuber 2005). Further, the criteria used to evaluate an individual's performance become more vague and tied more to organizational success as one rises up through an organizational hierarchy (Dornbusch and Scott 1975); issues of legitimacy associated with status hierarchies also affect how individuals and positions are evaluated (Baron 1984; Baron and Pfeffer 1994; Della Fave 1980; Johnson, Dowd, Ridgeway, Cook, and Massey 2006). Also, managers must make decisions in ambiguous situations with no clear solution or path, and often respond to this uncertainty via attempts to increase homogeneity in structure, culture, and personnel (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Kanter 1977). Thus, considering the effects of appropriate cultural capital on workplace rewards and evaluation sheds light on the importance of mechanism-oriented explanations of work inequality.

Second, cultural capital is used by dominant groups to exclude others from jobs, privileges, and other key social resources (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Lareau and Weininger 2003). As noted earlier, valued cultural capital reflects the values of the dominant group in a given institution. White men generally dominate and control the

corporate sector, particularly in supervisory and management positions (Bell and Nkomo 2001; Pierce 1995; 2003; Reitman 2006; Reskin 2000), and thus, set the normative standards for valued practices, attitudes, and behaviors. Indeed, some scholars contend that whiteness itself is a privileged form of cultural capital (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Nadimpalli Reeves 2001) and heavily influences the cultural resources valued in a particular context (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Lewis 2003). Examining how cultural capital results in the exclusion or inclusion of certain employees based on their race/gender/class social location will lead to a greater understanding of workplace inequality beyond what research based on homophily approaches can offer.

Third, different types of cultural capital are valued in different contexts or “fields,” to use Bourdieu’s terminology (Hall 1992; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Swartz 1997). Although forms of elite cultural capital – e.g., knowledge about classical music or modern art – might be valued in an upper-class setting, Erickson (1996) found them to be not used or rewarded in a corporate setting. As noted earlier, Lareau and Lamont have urged sociologists to document forms of cultural capital in various American institutions (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Thus, it is compelling to extend this framework to the workplace, a context in which cultural capital has rarely been examined, in an attempt to explicate the structures of cultural capital that are produced and valued within a major corporation.

In summary, cultural capital theory provides a powerful framework for examining ascriptive inequality in the workplace. It allows us to consider the importance of culture in the workplace while examining the effects of race, gender, and class. The framework offers a more powerful and flexible model of workplace inequality than explanations that rely on homophily and stereotyping; it also provides insight into issues of workplace power and exclusion. Lamont and Lareau (1988), in a critical review of American cultural capital studies, specifically noted the

potential of this framework for studies of work settings. And as noted previously, work and occupations scholars have called for more research of this type as well (e.g., Reskin 2003; Vallas 2003). By extending cultural capital analysis to the workplace, this paper explicates important mechanisms in racial and gender inequality inside the workplace.

Despite the power and appropriateness of this approach, previous literature on cultural capital in the workplace is scarce. Workplace inequality studies have mostly neglected a consideration of culture, while research on culture at work has not examined issues of inequality (e.g., Harper and Lawson 2003; Hodson 2004). However, a small body of literature provides insight into the effects of culture in the production of inequality at work, and demonstrate the usefulness of the cultural capital framework for workplace studies.

Erickson (1996), in an exemplary critique and extension of Bourdieu's framework, analyzed data from a survey of private security industry workers in Toronto, and found cultural variety to be more advantageous in the workplace than knowledge of high-status culture; that is, knowledge of mainstream, popular culture topics (such as sports, magazines, best-selling books, and local restaurants) was more often used than knowledge of elite culture. Erickson also found that cultural resources are needed by managers for both domination of and coordination with employees. This study is particularly notable for challenging Bourdieu's contention that high-status culture is the key to the relationship between class and culture. In addition, Erickson's work is the only study I have found that documents, rather than presumes, the types of culture that are useful in a particular field. Even so, her operationalization relies primarily on conversations with a key informant and not on responses from employees, as this project does.

Stuber (2005) explored the relevance of class and culture at work via interviews with upwardly mobile white workers in three broad occupational categories (social service and

teaching, professional/managerial, and self-employed). She found that the cultural capital of working class whites was sometimes an asset (when working with clients or other employees from the working class) and other times a liability (when participants reported feeling out of place or alienated around fellow employees with higher class backgrounds). Stuber's work provides evidence that cultural capital affects the success and upward mobility of employees in some contexts; this project also underscores the importance of cultural matching in the workplace.

Kaplan (2006) found black architects to be frustrated by their lack of cultural capital in the industry. Despite having similar credentials as white architects, black architects found themselves unable to influence popular styles and trends in the same fashion as their white counterparts. Kaplan used cultural capital in a broader sense – i.e., more in terms of the reputation and legitimacy that accompany a professional social, cultural, and academic credentials – than I do in this project, and did not examine the specific cultural resources that black architects draw on in interactions with their peers and managers. However, this work is noteworthy for being the only study I am aware of that investigates race and cultural capital in the context of an adult institution.

Davies-Netzley (1998) interviewed senior corporate executives (presidents or chief executive officers) about their views on corporate mobility and success. She found that male executives attributed their success to individual attributes, such as hard work and a competitive nature, and downplayed the idea of an “old boys’ network.” Conversely, women recognized the significance of cultural capital for upward mobility. This study’s women noted the importance of developing the sociocultural interests that powerful male peers enjoyed. Overall, Davies-Netzley found the

cultural capital that is valued in corporate management to be highly gendered, and a key resource for women who wished to advance.

Kay and Hagan (1998) used a survey of Canadian lawyers to investigate why men were far more likely than women to attain partner status. The study found that cultural capital significantly affected the chances of women to become law firm partners. Kay and Hagan operationalized cultural capital in terms of “nonfirm culture/professional dispositions” (two items indicating if the respondent was a leader in legal education or law reform) and “firm culture/practice dispositions” (several items measuring factors such as the respondent’s desire to be a senior partner, his or her status in terms of public recognition, and if s/he was honored by a professional organization). While I contend that their operationalization of cultural capital actually measures strong work attributes – as opposed to the broader, non-work cultural interests that are considered in Davies-Netzley’s (1998) work or this paper – their findings still provide support for the significance of the less tangible, cultural aspects of corporate employment, as well as the manner in which they are gendered.

While these studies are significant for extending the cultural capital framework to the workplace, they differ from this study in important ways: for example, they do not include employees of all levels in a mainstream corporate setting, do not allow managers and employees to define the valued forms of cultural capital in the field of study, and do not investigate how employees activate their cultural capital in social interactions. This project makes important contributions to the literature by using data collected at a large, multinational corporation; by examining the specific forms of culture that are valued in this setting; and by considering how cultural capital is converted into advantage. Setting this study in a large, mainstream, corporate workplace is particularly relevant given the large number of Americans who work in major

corporations , as well as the lack of access afforded to sociologists by those in the corporate sector (Vallas 2003).

METHODS

Defining the research questions and concepts

The first step in assessing the role cultural capital plays in the creation or reproduction of workplace inequality is to determine which forms of cultural capital influence success and promotion. I follow Lamont and Lareau (1988) by first identifying the expectations managers of a major corporation (Aimco) have for employees in terms of sociocultural involvement, knowledge, and attitudes, with an emphasis on how these expectations influence informal evaluations of employees. I then examine the cultural capital – the culturally-based knowledge, behaviors, attitudes, abilities, and self-presentations – that Aimco employees possess and activate in order to meet these managerial and institutional expectations.

I also analyze and discuss the ways in which employees convert cultural capital into forms of advantage, including increased social capital, opportunities for mobility, and other valued work resources. Examining these issues will lead to a greater understanding of how cultural capital serves to reproduce race, gender, and class inequality in the corporate workplace.

Site, access, and data

To answer questions about cultural capital, I use interview and observational data collected at the corporate headquarters of Aimco, a major, multinational, retail corporation located in the Midwest. Aimco employs over 1,400 employees in several subsidiaries and a non-profit arm in this location. Aimco's six major divisions – as well as the fact that corporate acquisitions in recent years have led employees to relocate to the headquarters from various locations around the

country – provide an unusual amount of organizational and social diversity under one roof.

Aimco's public relations literature stresses that each company in the organization has its own history, culture, and training programs. Further, some of the most prominent sociological studies of corporations took place at one research site (Hochschild 1997; Kanter 1977).

Access to Aimco was gained via a key informant: Alice is a white, college-educated, middle manager in her late 30s. At Aimco, she is popular, highly visible, and well-trusted, and her credibility was significant in terms of establishing trust with employees who agreed to be interviewed, most of whom were enthusiastic to refer other employees to my project. Alice works with employees in a wide variety of departments and many levels of hierarchy, from the lowest ranked employees in the mail room to executive management, and her insight and guidance were invaluable. My 12 years of previous corporate experience were helpful as well. Many participants noted that they were happy to talk to a researcher who could personally relate to their situations and, as one participant noted, "spoke the language." Upper-level managers expressed an interest in my transition from the corporate sector to academia – my perception is that my corporate experience, combined with the credibility I gained through Alice, put them at ease and suggested that I might be less critical of Aimco than researchers who had not spent time in the corporate sector.

My initial approach to Aimco was via a brief written proposal Alice gave to the company's vice-president of human resources on my behalf. In the proposal, I requested the company's permission to conduct my interviews and observations at their headquarters, and asked for access to a space (a spare office or conference room) I could use for up to a month for interviews. In return, I offered to present a summary of my findings and policy recommendations to the company's management. The vice-president of human resources was interested in the project and

gave his approval – Aimco’s vice-president of legal affairs rejected the proposal, however, for reasons that were not made clear to me. In the end, the human resources VP explained that the company would not prohibit me from conducting research on site, but that they there also not willing to officially sponsor or endorse the project.

This turned out to be a great situation for this research: I was still able to conduct interviews on site, but I would not owe the company any summary reports at the end of the project. Thus, I was able to tell each participant at the outset of our interview that in addition to their identity remaining anonymous, as promised in the university-approved consent form, no one in the company would learn about the results of the study. The study’s participants appreciated this, and I suspect that it encouraged their willingness to be frank and open (more than one participant commented to the effect of, “I would be fired if people heard me saying this”). Although it was somewhat inconvenient to not be able to set up a temporary interview space for a number of weeks, the participants’ candor, and the fact that I was able to conduct my research without any further obligations to Aimco, more than outweighed the inconveniences.

I use qualitative data from three sources. The first and primary source of data is a set of semi-structured, face-to-face, in-depth interviews with thirty Aimco employees, conducted from July 2005 to January 2007. I used a purposive, snowball sampling method to identify participants. This design is effective when the researcher has a strong knowledge of the population (my previous corporate experience and Alice’s guidance were beneficial) and is able to use personal judgment in drawing the sample. This approach enabled me to conduct a cost-effective study while also maximizing diversity in the sample (Babbie 2001; Feagin 1991). I attempted to stratify my sample equally by race, gender, education, and hierarchical location in the company (i.e., entry level, middle management, executive management). The final sample consisted of 20

women and 10 men, 19 whites and 11 blacks, 21 in the middle-class and 9 in the working-class, and 20 people with college degrees vs. 10 with less than a college degree; participants were equally distributed across the three tiers of Aimco's hierarchy (see appendix A). The gender imbalance is due to the incredible shortage of black men in the company, as there are fewer than ten black males in corporate positions.

The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to two hours, with an average length of approximately 75 minutes, and were conducted in a setting of the employee's choosing – locations included Aimco's onsite cafeteria and conference rooms, as well as nearby coffeehouses and restaurants. Roughly half of the interviews took place on-site at Aimco's headquarters, which yielded additional benefits in terms of data. I would generally meet the participant in the main company lobby, and then follow him or her to the site of the interview. This enabled me to observe how the participant interacted with other employees along the way, as they stopped to chat about a work project or just exchanged pleasantries, and provided additional context to the participant's comments. For the participants whom I observed at after-work outings, it facilitated a comparison of how they interacted with employees at work and in informal social situations, and enabled me to have a better grasp of how they activated their cultural capital. Notably, no one was hesitant to be seen with me in the office, which assured me that participants were comfortable to talk with me and were being open and honest in the process.

In the interview, I asked participants questions about a range of issues including: their tenure at Aimco (including how they got to the company); mobility and success – both their own and their perceptions of how others advance and succeed; social and cultural behaviors and preferences at Aimco; their work-related networks; the importance of race, class, and gender at

the company; and their family class background. A semi-structured interview approach allowed me to explore the main research questions while also remaining flexible and open to participants' responses and emergent themes, an important aspect given the scarcity of work in this area.

All interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim by a third party (I carefully compared transcripts to the interview recording to insure accuracy). Demographic information was collected via a brief questionnaire at the outset of our meeting. All of the names used are pseudonyms.

To develop questions about the nature and importance of the sociocultural domain at Aimco, I relied on data from a pilot study, previous studies that examined corporate culture (Harper and Lawson 2003; Hochschild 1997; Kanter 1977; Schor 1991), my informant's guidance, and my own experience in the corporate sector. The result was a group of questions centered around four types of social interaction at the company: (1) official, company-sponsored functions, such as the holiday party, and numerous events and activities to support the company's non-profit division; (2) organized, company-sanctioned groups and activities (e.g., athletic teams, book club, and a Bible study group); (3) informal gatherings organized by individuals such as happy hours, parties at employees' houses, or outings to entertainment establishments; and (4) the topics of conversation at work.

My second source of data was collected via participant-observation at six official company events, as well as many informal gatherings, such as happy hours and related social outings, parties at employees' houses, and dinners at restaurants. In addition to observing interactions between Aimco employees of various levels, I was able to conduct informal interviews in these settings. The third source consisted of regular, on-going briefings with my informant. These were

particularly helpful for acquiring additional anecdotes and discussing themes that emerged from the data.

All interviews, observations, and notes were coded and analyzed in Atlas.ti. Transcripts were carefully and repeatedly reviewed line-by-line to code for preexisting themes, and I used grounded theory techniques to analyze and code for newly emergent themes (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Rubin and Rubin 2005; Ryan and Bernard 2003). I also used personal memos throughout the entire project to reflect on developing themes, coding decisions, and the overall progress of the project.

Culture and context at Aimco

Before I present the results, I want to briefly describe Aimco in more detail to put the findings in stronger context. As noted earlier, Aimco is a major, multinational company. Although its headquarters are in a large Midwestern city, it has offices in other countries as well; Aimco's products are sold worldwide. The corporation has grown significantly over the past decade, in large part through acquisitions, and has announced plans to continue to grow. Aimco is considered one of the dominant players in its market space.

Aimco has a youthful, energetic vibe, from the offices – which are open, well-lit, and colorful, and sport a modern design – to the fashionably-dressed employees buzzing to and from meetings. Aimco has been repeatedly recognized nationally by a mainstream business publication as a great company to work for, and most employees I spoke with would agree – they seem happy with the company and state that it is a good place to work. Employees appreciate the products and company mission, feel fairly compensated, and are enthusiastic about the company's charitable involvement in the community. Even the harshest critics I interviewed are frustrated more with specific management decisions, particularly in regard to diversity, than they

are with the company overall. The intangibles of a company's culture can be difficult to put into words, but they are quite discernible, especially when one compares Aimco to more conservative companies in the banking or insurance industries, for example.

Yet, Aimco struggles somewhat with diversity. Two years ago, the executive management announced that increasing diversity was a major goal for the company. To this end, they created committees to study the issue, and mandated that interviews for every position at middle management or above must interview a "diversity candidate." Interestingly, while executive management defines diversity very broadly – in terms of ethnic background, management and communication styles, and personal differences – it is operationalized in hiring processes and company events strictly in racial terms. Many managers I spoke with seemed sincere in their efforts to increase the company's diversity, and admitted their frustrations over the slow progress being made. Their commitment to diversity is underscored, I believe, by their allowing my research to be conducted on-site, and by the willingness of managers, particularly those in the company's upper ranks, who agreed to be interviewed for this research.

Further, employees communicated their frustrations with the company's handling of diversity in three ways. First (and briefly), many black participants expressed frustration with the lack of blacks in upper and executive management positions, and what they see as insincere or poorly-handled attempts at dealing with diversity. Second, blacks and white self-described progressives found fault with Aimco's minority recruitment, claiming that the company does not work hard enough to find quality minority candidates. This fuels a sense of frustration when they feel forced to interview "diversity candidates" that do not seem qualified for the job, thus dooming the diversity efforts to failure. Third, some whites believe that upper management's

emphasis on diversity provides too much leeway to unqualified or poorly performing workers, who are generally black (the company has very few Asian or Hispanic employees).

In short, Aimco provides a rich, productive setting for research. It is in this context that I examine issues of race, gender, class, culture, and inequality.

RESULTS

Overview

I find strong evidence that cultural capital is an important resource for success and mobility at Aimco, and contributes to the reproduction of race and gender inequality. While I contend that cultural capital is central to the generation of ascriptive inequality, I focus here primarily on explicating the general forms of cultural capital that are important for success in a corporate setting such as Aimco, as well as the advantages that are gained by those with greater degrees of cultural capital. It is important for the reader to remember throughout this section that race, gender, and class all significantly affect Aimco employees' possession of, and ability to activate, cultural capital.

Based on my analysis of the data, I find three forms of cultural capital to be significant for success and upward mobility at Aimco: (1) knowledge about informal expectations and an understanding of the importance of the company's sociocultural realm; (2) the ability to participate in and navigate a range of informal social events; and (3) knowledge about a variety of mainstream, popular culture topics (i.e., being a "cultural omnivore"). Further, Aimco employees with greater degrees of cultural capital gain significant advantages over those with less cultural capital in a number of ways: (1) increasing visibility and access to supervisors and decision-makers; (2) building networks with other Aimco employees outside of their usual work

responsibilities; (3) acquiring and sharing informal knowledge about the company; and (4) having opportunities to demonstrate more of their personality and “real self” outside of typical work situations. Next, I will discuss the three forms of cultural capital and provide illustrative quotes as to their importance and the manner in which they lead to greater advantage.

Knowledge about informal expectations

The first form of cultural capital that advantages some employees is simply being aware of the importance of social and cultural activities at Aimco. Knowledge of this sort may seem obvious, but as an old adage states, “sometimes you don’t know what you don’t know.” From the highest levels of executive management down to entry-level workers with college degrees, there is a strong consensus that employees cannot succeed and advance at Aimco without knowing about and participating appropriately in the company’s informal culture, to be described in the next section.

I asked eight managers – two executives and six in various levels of middle management – to evaluate work performance and involvement in Aimco’s sociocultural domain in terms of their relative importance for employees’ success at Aimco; the managers rated the two items on a 100-point scale. The managers felt that, on average, *sociocultural involvement accounts for 44% of employees’ success at Aimco*; pure, quantifiable performance accounts for the remaining 56%. The estimates of cultural capital’s importance ranged from highs of 65% and 70% from two managers (one in senior management) to lows of 20% and 25% from two others. I expected managers to downplay the importance of social and cultural aspects that are not directly tied to actual work functions. Thus, this admission is remarkable, especially coming from managers employed in an environment that is focused on the bottom line and driven by results.

Kyle is a white, college-educated, middle manager in his early 40s. His comments about the importance of Aimco's sociocultural realm were typical of the managers I interviewed. When asked about informal social gatherings at Aimco, he responded:

Half the time, it's because I want to go and half the time it's because it's an "I really should go" sort of thing. Sure if you never went to anything you would definitely be left out of a lot of conversations, a lot of discussions, be less recognized, that sort of thing. Yeah, you have to participate. You *have* to play. Honestly, there have been times where I've gone to (my manager) and said look, "is this something I need to be at?" He often answers sort of in code, but yes...ok, you're basically saying I should be there for that.

I think you can perform and perform and perform, but if you don't have someone who's willing to go to bat for you, or some way to get noticed...um, let's face it, this isn't the 1950's where you go, "hey boss, I want a promotion." That just doesn't happen anymore.

<DP: Like (comic strip character) Dagwood Bumstead?>

Exactly! (laughs) I think for employees here, you have to perform first, but if your boss isn't willing to go to bat for you and you haven't built that relationship or some other kind of connecting-the-dots kind of relationship, you're not getting anywhere. You can be the best performer on earth, and you're just not getting anywhere. You have to do these (informal social) things.

In these and related comments, Kyle notes the benefits gained from participation in Aimco's informal culture in terms of information sharing and increased visibility to management and decision-makers. His comments were typical of the managers I interviewed, especially in terms of sheer performance not being enough to succeed at Aimco. A poor performer is not likely to succeed solely by activating his cultural capital, but an excellent performer who does not activate cultural capital may not succeed either. What is notable about Kyle's views is that by virtue of his position as a middle manager, he is responsible for hiring (he has a team of four direct reports), but is also interested in moving up the corporate ladder – in fact, he was promoted

during the course of this study. In other words, his views affect not only his chances of success and mobility within the company, as the chances of those who report to him as well.

Kyle's comments about the importance of the company's informal culture are supported by Jane, a white, college-educated, senior vice-president and the highest ranking woman on the senior executive team:

From my perspective, I don't think it made me say, "oh I want to promote this person because I'm socially friendly with them." But, I think it makes you look at people in a broader light. Okay, they're really more diverse with their interests. Maybe they're more well-rounded than some of the other people. So, maybe there's great performance, but here's all the other things they do too. Kind of like when you're applying to college, you know? Okay, what activities are they involved in and how is that going to help them?

If you want to get ahead then I think you have to do more of these things – see and be seen -- so that the people know who you are.

Here, Jane emphasizes the importance of work performance, but recognizes that Aimco's informal cultural realm provided other employees with an opportunity to demonstrate to her more of their personality and sociocultural interests, aspects that might not come through in typical work interactions. Jane also described how she saw employees going out of their way to gain access and increase visibility through non-work social events, particularly in regard to a new executive who had a reputation for partying and drinking:

I have to tell you, people did it with Andre. When he first joined the company, there were certain people who were like, "come on, he likes to drink, let's go out and party with him." And those people...he quickly became very good friends with them, and it worked for them. I took a different approach. I would say I was friendly with him...maybe not as friendly as some. I really wasn't comfortable with that. I mean I like to suck up as good as the next person (laughs) but I'm not going to go to what I consider the extreme.

An especially interesting response came from Neal, a white, college-educated, middle manager in marketing. In our initial conversation, Neal rated the importance of sociocultural

involvement at 30%, but mainly emphasized more typical attributes when describing successful employees at Aimco, such as demonstrating leadership and adding value through your work contributions. However, Neal followed up the next day to say that he had given more thought to our conversation and had a different view on the importance of cultural capital:

I thought about your questions all day. It's all about relationships here, it's all about who you know. I was invited to go running with two of the executives, but I haven't been accepting the invitations. After thinking about your questions, I realized that I'm missing out on an opportunity to connect with the big dogs. I realized that others I know don't get invited and that it's a very select crew. I really realized that I'm missing out on a good opportunity to get in good with those guys.

These things make a big difference. If you can't attend things outside of work because of family obligations, for example, you have to find ways inside of work to network with those people that you missed at those other functions. I just had a meeting with Stephen (one of his direct reports) and told him, "you really have to get out there more, these things are important." But his wife is pregnant...I told him it gets harder to get involved in these things now that you have a family, but you *have* to do it.

As with Kyle and Jane, Neal recognizes the importance of sociocultural involvement not just for himself, but for his direct reports as well. Neal recognizes that he cannot pass social and cultural opportunities when they are presented to him, and he also strongly urges one of his subordinates to get more involved as well. In short, it is clear that strong performance is not enough at Aimco – rather, employees must perform well *and* find ways to gain visibility outside of regular work channels. Without knowledge of the importance of Aimco's informal culture, employees will have difficulty gaining more visibility and broadening their networks.

Participating in and navigating social events

Just knowing about the importance of the social and cultural sector at Aimco is not enough. The second form of cultural capital valued at Aimco is the ability and willingness to participate in, and appropriately navigate, a variety of informal sociocultural activities. Whereas nearly all

employees I spoke with attend or participate in official Aimco events such as the holiday party and Aimco's organized charitable activities – most participants recognized the importance of at least “showing face” at the former, and genuinely enjoy participating in the latter – not all participants were able or willing to engage in informal work-related outings. These outings are often after-work happy hours at local bars, but also consist of sports-related activities (including company-sanctioned, co-ed sports teams and exercising in the company gym alongside certain managers and executives), loosely organized nights at a local pub or restaurant, or less frequently, parties at employees' houses.

I find that informal social activities are important – and translate to additional advantage for those who participate – for three reasons. First, participants report that they are a significant way to increase one's visibility and access to supervisors and decision-makers. This is especially important for employees whose responsibilities do not make them highly visible within the company, or who feel held back by an obstructive or unsupportive supervisor. These activities also provide employees with opportunities to expand their networks outside of their usual work responsibilities. A wealth of research has demonstrated that more varied and diverse types of information are likely to be acquired by those with broader social networks composed of causal contacts or “weak ties” (Granovetter 1973; 1983; 2005); there is also a rich literature on the significance of informal networks at work (for a useful overview, see McGuire 2002).

Second, informal social activities are key settings where important knowledge about the company, particularly informal knowledge, is shared and discussed. Research finds that most organizational knowledge is acquired through informal, rather than formal, channels (Ipe 2003). Informal knowledge, especially information relating to informal methods of evaluation used in a given institution or organization, can be vital for an individual's success (Kanter 1977; Lareau

2003; Lewis 2003). Further, this relates to the previous point, as those with broader networks are likely to acquire a wider variety of work-related knowledge. This can be especially advantageous in a company as large, and comprised of as many divisions and departments, as Aimco.

Third, informal social activities offer employees an opportunity to exhibit more of their personality and “real self” outside of the workplace. As evidenced by Jane’s quote earlier, this provides managers with an opportunity to see employees “in a broader light.” Getting to know influential decision-makers in a more leisurely setting may be particularly important given that research finds that the pace of work has quickened over the past two decades (Maume and Purcell 2007). Demonstrating more of their non-work personalities may also help employees bond and build friendships with their peers, and construct relationships that are crucial to information-sharing (Ipe 2003; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998).

Comments by Etta – an older, black female who works as a customer service liaison to Aimco’s clients – were particularly enlightening and illustrated the advantages gained through this form of cultural capital. Talking specifically about happy hours, bar outings, and a party at a manager’s house, she said:

Yeah, I do participate. It’s nice to be a part of it, and then you get to see a different side of people in that kind of venue. Whereas some days you don’t get to see the “true self” because we work in a structured environment, because it is corporate America. But after that 5:01 mark, people let their hair down, and you get to see a lot more of them than you normally would from 8-to-5. So yeah, it is important for you to participate in those things, because I believe they count heads at that too. I do, I believe they count heads and...well, “she’s never there...is there a reason why?”

Look, I have two things against me coming in the door: I’m black and I’m a female. So I get a lot out of it. You can obtain a lot of information outside of work. Whereas they might not be so apt to give it to you prior to (going). Like at Will’s house (a vice-president who threw a party at his house for his entire team), there were people from our other offices that I wouldn’t have normally been able to speak with because I don’t deal with them on a one-on-one basis. Just to sit with them and talk one-on-one, and find out what their job is, and what’s going on...I feel that is very informative.

I tell my manager all the time – I may go and have a good time, but rest assured I’m learning something while I’m there. And I’m a people person, so I watch people. And people’s actions tell you a lot about them, so, it’s interesting, it’s very interesting.

Not only did Etta note the importance placed on informal social activities by Aimco management (“I believe they count heads”), she also noted the many benefits she could gain: gaining information about others’ jobs, learning more about the company, showing her “true self” to others (and seeing her workmates in a similar manner), and learning by simply observing how coworkers behave in these situations. Notably, she recognized these outings as a resource she can use to battle the disadvantages brought about by being an older black female.

Jordan is a younger, white, college-educated, senior manager dubbed “the future of the company” by one executive I spoke with. He does not believe that sociocultural involvement is a necessity, but agrees that they are extremely helpful settings for getting to know subordinates – and for them to know him and other managers – at a deeper level, and building relationships:

To me, roles, titles, hierarchy is all, you know, just erased in those events. I don’t think... again I personally don’t think it’s imperative that you’re involved. I’ve always been a family-first kind of guy. If you can’t participate in something – the volunteer work, which is more formal, or the sports teams, which are more informal – because you’ve got, you know, family or other commitments, then you can find ways to do it during the day.

To me it’s not a place to network because network sounds too formal. It’s more of a place to connect and just build relationships, so that for me...so that when I walk down the hall, I can know somebody by name and make them feel good about it, and I feel good that they know me by name. If we weren’t playing softball or volleyball or something, or do volunteer work together, we may not have had the opportunity to meet...or may not be crossing paths in a meeting or something on the business side. So I like to meet those people individually outside of work.

Jordan feels that building relationships – what he calls the “soft part of the business” – is vital, and that sociocultural involvement is 65% of being successful at Aimco. Thus, it is significant that he puts such a high premium on the opportunities afforded through informal

social activities. Jordan later noted that he has an open-door policy and tries to let employees know that he is willing to meet with them for lunch or coffee whenever he is available, regardless of their level or status. While others noted that he is known for his openness and for being one of the popular executives, they also mentioned that “you just don’t call an executive out of the blue and ask them to meet with you if you don’t have a reason.” Indeed, this is part of cultural capital: knowing how to skillfully negotiate social situations with those in power.

Aimco employees who are aware of the importance of Aimco’s informal culture recognize peers who are exceptionally good at activating this form of cultural capital, to the point of possibly taking it to the extreme. Lola, a white, college-educated professional in her early 30s, describes a coworker named Skip in the comments below. Skip began as an intern and was promoted four levels in less than two years. This is significant because most employees are promoted one level per year at most, and even that is considered somewhat rare.

I firmly believe it’s because of his social connections. He has a frat-boy type personality, and by that I mean that he’s just like, “hey let’s go out drinking and...” He’s very social and he knows the right bullsh*t words to say to make people like him. He started going to the gym, talking sports down in the gym, started making a lot of contacts with big people, big names in the finance group. Then he started running with those guys (a group of white male managers, including high-ranked executives, who run together) and after that, I mean, he’s already up to manager now!

A lot of people question that. I’ve heard people who work with him more directly than me say that he’s not at the level he should be. I think he’s very young. Yep...it pays to run with the big-wigs.

Lola’s comments illustrate all of the reasons why this form of cultural capital is important. By virtue of interactions that were not specific to his job duties, Skip was able to improve his visibility and make connections with key decision-makers, with the result being his rapid rise through the ranks. Skip’s promotions also underscore the importance of cultural capital in the

subjective nature of evaluations, with meritocracy and quantifiable performance not always being the sole reasons for the success of some individuals (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2003). It is worth noting that Lola's criticism of Skip is not a case of sour grapes: other participants offered him as a prime example of the importance of informal social activities at Aimco.

Being aware of the importance of these activities is significant (the first form of cultural capital noted), but three other aspects are important as well. First, employees must be invited to these activities – one participant noted that “the cool kids” in her department often exclude others from work-related events. Second, individuals must be able to attend – several participants noted the time and scheduling conflicts brought about by family responsibilities or, in Etta's case, having a part-time job in the evening to help pay the bills. Last, employees must know how to navigate these social situations that often involve a peculiar mix of managers from various levels of hierarchy, peers, and alcohol. Knowing the proper level of comportment – how to behave appropriately and tastefully – is key. This is a prime example of the importance of activation: knowing how and when to skillfully activate one's resources is a significant and often neglected aspect of cultural capital.

While the intricacies and subtleties of a smooth, successful social interaction can be difficult to document, it appears that one important aspect is for employees to not appear too aggressive or naked in their desires to network. I observed one participant, who was open about her desires to advance in her interview, in two social outings. Her eagerness to impress upper managers was apparent: she frequently cornered managers in conversations and laughed a little too hard at even straightforward comments. Their attempts to abandon the conversations were clear. My informant confirmed, through discussion of outings she participated in or office gossip she had

heard, other examples of individuals who were known to “turn off” upper management by seizing every social opportunity as a chance to impress and network. Navigating these situations skillfully is just as critical as knowing about their importance.

For example, Kyle, the middle manager quoted earlier, noted the danger of being too involved in the company’s sociocultural activities. Kyle commented that while it is important to partake of these social opportunities and use them to one’s advantage when possible, it is also important to maintain a balance. He specifically noted that one of his direct reports, who rarely passed up an opportunity to schmooze with higher-ups in social situations, was in danger of not being taken seriously by upper management because she was seen as “being one of the party crew.” Kyle remarked that it is important to “pick your spots” and attempt to network wisely. “You *have* to be smooth about it,” another participant commented.

Being a cultural omnivore

The third form of cultural capital that is important for success at Aimco is the ability to discuss a wide variety of social and cultural topics – i.e., it pays to be a “cultural omnivore” (Erickson 1996; Peterson and Kern 1996). This form of cultural capital is particularly important for facilitating smooth, successful interactions in the social settings described in the previous section. Whereas Bourdieu’s original research focused on the importance of knowing high-status culture in France (e.g., Bourdieu 1984), recent American cultural research confirms the importance of being culturally omnivorous: i.e., in mainstream settings, it is more advantageous to be conversant in a variety of “lowbrow” popular culture topics than it is to be an expert in elite, high-status culture (Erickson 1996). In addition, research finds that knowledge about popular culture positively affects the development of weak ties in networks (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006) which, as noted earlier, are significant for acquiring information in organizations.

Study participants were nearly unanimous in reporting that being conversant in a wide range of topics is vital – not only for getting along with coworkers, but also for navigating social interactions with managers and decision-makers above them. Brenda, a white, senior director, noted the relevance of this in regard to her weekly meetings with other senior directors and their managers:

Sometimes they start to talk about something like – for example, we don't see a lot of movies, there's not time. But they'll start talking about movies and I'll maybe be like, "that's one I need to go see." Or somebody will talk about maybe a cultural thing that they went to. And in my head I'll go, "gee I have absolutely no interest in that but I either need to say something intelligent about it or I need to appear very engaged." Yes, absolutely. It's more about...are you as culturally adept as they are? You need to be able to make a comment or two and appear versed.

In further describing the importance of being a cultural omnivore, Brenda remarked that it can often be difficult to keep up to speed on current topics. In addition to working long hours and being a successful, driven, high-level manager, Brenda is also a devoted mother who puts a high priority on her children's interests and activities. Brenda noted that she sometimes feels less in tune with social and cultural topics because she focuses so intently on her family when not at work. It speaks to the importance of being well-versed that she and other employees feel as though they have to make an effort to keep up.

Although it is important to be broadly conversant, certain social and cultural topics dominate at Aimco. Participants note that conversations are generally dominated by: sports, parenting/family issues; fashion, which is especially important given that the company is a very modern, forward-thinking company; exercise/nutrition, which relates heavily to the sociocultural importance of the onsite company gym, which was mentioned earlier; and reality television shows, particularly *American Idol* and *Survivor*. Alice, this project's informant, described the relevant social and cultural topics in this manner:

Sports, of course, are huge – football, baseball, basketball. Everyone talks sports all the time, and, as a female, if you can hold your ground in a sports conversation, the guys are impressed. Even though I am a sports fan, I don't have time to follow games or teams closely, so I pick up things from my husband and use those in conversations which at least makes me sound knowledgeable at some level. Men who can't talk sports are probably at some sort of disadvantage as far as fitting in.

Fashion is important. Our company is becoming more fashion-oriented and people dress better than they used to. It's expensive to follow that and you can pick out the people who are trying to fit in fashion-wise and who aren't because they can't afford to or don't care to. But there's definitely a new edge in our culture regarding appearance. Having the "right" appearance takes money. I've even heard people comment when I've been on interview teams that someone wasn't dressed well and what does that say about them.

Knowing about popular TV shows is big. We also talk about our weekends and what we did. Lots of people have kids and there's a network among parents who talk kid stuff all the time. I see live music and go to bars a lot. There are those who find that "cool and interesting" and others who can't relate.

Overall, I found this form of cultural capital to be slightly less important than the others, primarily because it is less exclusive. That is, the popular topics of conversation are not elite or esoteric, and nearly anyone can pick up relevant tidbits about sports, television shows, and the like – although, as Brenda and Alice noted, various factors (work-family conflicts, income, class, and gender) may prohibit some employees from being as well-versed as others. That said, it is still necessary to know how and when to talk about these topics with managers and decision-makers. Further, as Jane remarked earlier from her perspective as an executive, showing interest in a wide range of topics demonstrates that one is more well-rounded than others.

Converting cultural capital into advantage

The comments above from managers and executives reveal the importance, from the perspectives of those with decision-making power, of cultural capital for evaluation and promotion at Aimco. Other participants' quotes provide excellent illustrations of how some

Aimco employees are able to convert valued cultural capital into advantage. To reiterate, employees who possess and activate cultural capital benefit via increased visibility to key supervisors and managers, expanded internal networks and increased work-related social capital, access to additional company knowledge, and further opportunities to demonstrate more of their personality outside of the workplace.

The process of converting cultural capital into tangible benefits is generally not instantaneous – i.e., it is obviously not as simple as a conversation with a manager about golf resulting in an immediate promotion. Rather, it is an ongoing process that involves repeated displays of cultural capital with decision-makers or key peers at strategic moments. In my participant observations – at official company events, informal gatherings outside of work, and lunches in the Aimco cafeteria – it was apparent that certain employees were far more consistent and skilled in their activation of their cultural capital than other employees; I triangulated these observations with my informant and other study participants.

Although I did not track every interviewee's career progress during the course of this study, at least ten of the participants I identified as particularly skilled at cultural capital activation were promoted (or recognized as ready for promotion by their supervisors) over the past year. Conversely, other study participants who do not possess valued cultural capital, particularly those who are not aware of the importance of the company's sociocultural domain, remained in the same positions throughout the 20 months in which I collected data.⁵ While a small body of literature has used to survey data to document how cultural capital is converted into forms of

⁵ Some participants were likely constrained by their human capital, particularly their lack of a college degree. However, some college-educated employees who suffered from a cultural capital deficit were open with their frustrations over their lack of mobility, and three participants actually asked me for advice at the end of their interviews.

advantage such as social capital (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006), I am not aware of studies other than the work of Lareau and her colleagues that use ethnographic techniques to observe adults engaging in cultural capital activation (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Horvat 1999).

DISCUSSION

The American workplace continues to be plagued by significant race and gender inequality. Researchers have contributed much to our collective understanding of the causes of these disparities outside of the workplace, but have been less successful at explaining how inequality is reproduced *inside* the workplace. Research in this area is impeded by a lack of access, as company gatekeepers are rarely enthusiastic about the prospects of opening their workplaces to examination and criticism from outsiders. The extant research that examines internal mechanisms of inequality relies primarily on explanations involving homophily and stereotyping. While this literature has made significant sociological contributions, I contend that cultural capital theory provides a more robust framework for investigations of work inequality.

In this paper, I examined interview and participant-observation data collected at a major corporation to document the forms of cultural capital that are valued at the company, particularly by managers and executives. I found understanding the importance of the company's informal culture, participating in a variety of informal social events, and being able to converse about a range of mainstream, popular culture topics to be important for how employees are evaluated, particularly in terms of promotions. Perhaps the most startling finding was the acknowledgment by eight managers, including two executives, that sociocultural involvement accounts for, on average, 44% of employees' success at Aimco – quantifiable performance accounts for the remaining 56%. This admission of the importance of what one executive described the “soft part

of the business” is especially notable in light of management’s strong emphasis on facts, figures, and the bottom line. This finding is also significant given that various forms of discrimination are more subtle and harder to document than ever before. Examining the importance and functioning of the “soft” side of corporate behavior can shed light on ascriptive inequality at work.

Further, I found that employees are able to convert their cultural capital into advantages in terms of greater visibility with and access to managers, increased social capital inside the company, additional company knowledge, and more opportunities to present their personality and interests outside of work. Employees who possess more of the cultural capital that is valued at Aimco hold clear advantages over their coworkers with less cultural capital. While some studies contend that involvement in work-related sociocultural activities is simply a signifier of important intangible traits such as loyalty, trustworthiness, honesty, and collegiality (Kanter 1977), it is clear that those who skillfully activate their cultural capital benefit in more tangible ways as well. It is also important to note that employees who are excluded, or who are not aware of the importance of the company’s informal culture, will not have equal opportunities to display these traits. As I discuss later in this project, race, gender, and class significantly affect Aimco employees’ possession of – and ability to activate and convert into advantage – cultural capital. In short, cultural capital functions as a crucial mechanism in the reproduction of inequality inside the workplace.

Beyond contributing to our understanding of the mechanisms of workplace inequality, this study also contributes to the literature on cultural capital in three key ways. First, while the majority of cultural capital studies are set in adolescent settings (generally, middle or high schools), this successfully extends the framework to an adult context. Second, this paper documents the locally-produced structures of knowledge and cultural capital that are valued in

one specific corporate workplace. Most research that uses this framework presumes the valued forms of cultural capital – here, I follow Lamont and Lareau’s (1988) directive to first document the informal expectations and valued cultural resources in a given context of study. Third, this is one of the very few studies that uses ethnographic techniques to observe adults engaging in cultural capital activation. Considering how cultural capital is activated and converted into advantage in everyday sociocultural interactions provides deeper insight into the mechanisms that produce inequality at the processual level.

There are some limitations to this study. First, compared to much survey research, my findings are based on a relatively small sample from just one company. Thus, the representativeness of the study’s participants and the generalizability of the paper’s findings are difficult to assess. However, this is less of a concern with qualitative research, which privileges depth and meaning over representativeness; seminal studies in the sociology of work and organizations used a similar methodological approach as this study (e.g., Hochschild 1997; Kanter 1977). Second, while I observed employees in many social settings, I was not able to study employees while they were actually at work. However, I made every effort to triangulate my conclusions through participant interviews and discussions with my informant, and feel confident that my findings are not biased by this limitation. Last, I do not have access to measures of work performance, which precludes me from controlling for employees’ work aptitudes the way one might in a regression equation. That said, this form of data may not have been helpful given that cultural capital affects how employees are evaluated, and that work performance is more difficult to quantify as one rises through the organizational hierarchy. Even with these limitations, it is important to note that my findings may actually be somewhat cautious

given Aimco overall progressiveness and commitment to diversity (even if it is implemented somewhat awkwardly).

My findings suggest a number of future research questions. It is imperative to examine how race, gender, and class affect the possession and activation of cultural capital in the corporate workplace. It is also important to consider a broader examination of cultural capital's role in the accumulative nature of inequality. For example, how does one's position in the company hierarchy influence the ability to activate cultural capital? My findings suggest that the higher one is in the corporate structure, the more opportunities one has to activate cultural capital. Other factors, such as work-family conflicts and sexuality, may play a role and hinder some employees from being more active in the company's informal culture. It is my hope that this study's findings will be extended in a larger project involving multiple corporate sites in different cities, with a broader range of influences and variables to be considered.

It is essential for sociologists to continue work of this type. While survey research provides us with many valuable findings, it is imperative that sociologists gain access to institutions and witness the moments when inequality is actually created through social interactions. Documenting the mechanisms of inequality that are internal to our major institutions, particularly one as important as the workplace, should be a high priority for researchers who are concerned with social disparities. Now that certain levels of inequality reach those of the Gilded Age (Krugman 2007), we can no longer be satisfied with identifying general trends – rather, we must focus on *how* inequality is created inside of institutions. It is my hope that this paper contributes in this regard.

CHAPTER THREE: RACE AT WORK: CULTURAL CAPITAL AND THE REPRODUCTION OF RACIAL INEQUALITY

INTRODUCTION

In American society, resources, opportunities, and rewards continue to be allocated unevenly by race, and a substantial body of sociological research has endeavored to explain these disparities. The current discourse on racial inequality is generally dominated by work located at the macro (e.g., Bonilla-Silva 1996; Bonilla-Silva 2003) and micro (e.g., Feagin 1991; Feagin and McKinney 2003) ends of the theoretical spectrum. The former is concerned with structural, societal-level explanations for racial inequality, while the latter focuses more on discrimination and racism in individual experiences. However, researchers are beginning to pay more attention to the middle-ground explanations centered on the importance of culture in racial inequality, particularly in regard to how racial boundaries and hierarchies are constructed between whites and blacks.

Cultural capital theory has emerged as a powerful framework for inquiry into the reproduction of social inequality. This framework considers how certain forms of knowledge, behaviors, and preferences help individuals gain an advantage in specific social contexts. Despite the theory's demonstrated power for the research on inequality, it has been used primarily in the study of adolescents, and has rarely been applied to the study of racial disparities.

In this paper, I demonstrate the relevance of cultural capital theory for the study of racial inequality by using interview and participant observation data to examine racial inequality inside a major corporation. While previous research on racial inequality at work has focused primarily on factors external to the workplace, this paper contributes to our knowledge by examining how race affects the reproduction of inequality via the company's informal cultural and relational

processes. In other words, how are some employees disadvantaged or advantaged by their sociocultural behaviors and preferences, and how does race affect this relationship?

This paper is part of a larger research project that explores the impact of race, gender, class, and culture in the reproduction of inequality in the corporate workplace. By situating this research in a major corporation, I seek to gain insight into these processes in an institutional context that affects the lives of millions, while also contributing to our broader understanding of how culture is involved in the reproduction of inequality.

BACKGROUND

Racial theories of inequality

Four decades after the passage of important Civil Rights legislation, race continues to be a major differentiating factor in American society, with whites holding a clear advantage over blacks in income, wealth, health, education, and many other important resources (Smelser, Wilson, and Mitchell 2001; U.S. Bureau of the Census 2003). Theories that attempt to explain racial disparities tend to focus on racism at the macro- or micro-level. Current discourse on race is dominated by macro theories – such as the “racial formation” framework (Omi and Winant 1994) and the theory of “color-blind racism” (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2003) – that blame structural, socially-embedded racism for racial inequality. Micro theories, on the other hand, concentrate on the causes and effects of racism at the everyday, individual level (Essed 1991; Feagin and McKinney 2003).

More recently, scholars have begun to consider more closely the middle ground by examining what cultural sociologist Michèle Lamont (1999) describes as “the cultural territories of race.” This literature centers on the importance of culture in the construction of racial

boundaries, the preservation of racial hierarchies, and the reproduction of racial inequality. In doing so, this work strives to understand the complex role that cultural factors play – going beyond, for example, more simplistic arguments such as the “culture of poverty” thesis (e.g., D'Souza 1995; Lewis 1969) – while recognizing the importance of both structure and agency. Exemplary studies include examinations of the status and stigma associated with fast food industry jobs for Harlem's working poor (Newman 1999), the ways in which black and white working class men understand social class and conceptualize the relationship between socioeconomic status and moral worth (Lamont 2000), and the sociocultural experiences of black executives in the corporate world (Anderson 1999).

Cultural capital theory

Despite the promise of this renewed attention to cultural factors and racial inequality, relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship between race and cultural capital, which has emerged as a powerful theoretical framework for understanding culture and inequality. The concept of cultural capital, developed by Pierre Bourdieu as part of a broader theory of the reproduction of class-based power and privilege, concerns the role culture plays in the reproduction of inequality. Bourdieu's model seeks to encompass both structure and agency, as well as power, domination, conflict, and legitimation (Bourdieu 1984; 2001; Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Cultural capital refers to the role cultural tastes, behaviors, practices, attitudes, and goods play in the reproduction of social class and inequality (Bourdieu 1984; 2001; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2003; Swartz 1997). In other words, it is the particular forms of knowledge (both formal and informal) and associated behaviors that enable individuals to gain advantages in

given social institutions or contexts. Cultural capital is often valuable for leading to additional social capital – i.e., the resources and knowledge gained through one's social networks.

In mainstream institutions, cultural capital reflects the values of the dominant class. Bourdieu found, for example, that middle- and upper-class students in French schools succeeded not solely through quantifiable performance, but rather were rewarded for their cultural capital, which included certain class-based linguistic skills such as grammar and accent, knowledge about informal academic culture, and an appreciation for the arts and humanities (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Similarly, Lareau found that American middle-class parents used their cultural capital to gain advantage for their children in school. Middle-class parents were more able than working-class parents to use cultural capital to lobby for interventions, interact with teachers and administrators as equals, and appear more in line with educators' expectations. Thus, cultural capital was an important mechanism for the reproduction of social class in the school setting (Lareau 2000; 2003).

Although its origins are in Bourdieu's studies of the French educational system, cultural capital has been successfully adapted to the study of inequality in American society over the past two decades. The majority of American cultural capital research concerns the reproduction of inequality in the educational system (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; Carter 2005; DiMaggio 1982; Eitle and Eitle 2002; Lareau 2000; 2003; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999), but this framework has also been applied to areas involving adults, including marital selection (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985), the legal system (Kinsey and Stalans 1999), and cultural production (Bielby 2004).

An important concept is the *activation* of cultural capital. That is, cultural capital is a resource that must be activated by individuals in social interactions and social networks. Merely

possessing a valued form of cultural capital is of little use if an actor cannot activate or use it in an appropriate manner in front of the gatekeepers or decision-makers in a given social context. For example, discussing obscure rock music with a corporate vice-president who prefers classical music is unlikely to gain one currency. Likewise, there is little benefit, in cultural capital terms, of activating this form of capital with a peer who cannot facilitate the conversion of one's cultural capital into additional resources. Thus, actors must skillfully activate their cultural capital at the right times, in the right places, and in front of the right people.

Cultural capital and race

Relatively few researchers have studied the relationship between cultural capital and race, despite the framework's promise for the analysis of racial inequality. While a number of studies of educational inequality examine racial differences in cultural capital (Carter 2003; 2005; Eitle and Eitle 2002; Lareau 2003; Orr 2003; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999), I am aware of just one study of race and cultural capital set in an adult context. Kaplan's (2006) research found that black architects are unable to influence popular styles and trends in the same manner as white architects, despite relatively equal professional credentials; a lack of cultural capital also constrains black architects' abilities to score high-profile design projects.

Scholars have advocated the use of cultural capital to study racial disparities in medical treatment (Malat 2006) and the workplace (Vallas 2003). I concur and contend that, despite the scarcity of research in this area, cultural capital is an appropriate framework for the study of racial inequality in mainstream American institutions – a major corporation, in the case of this paper – for three related reasons.

First, a key aspect of the cultural capital framework is that this form of capital is used by dominant groups to exclude others from jobs, privileges, and other key social resources

(Bourdieu 1984; Lamont and Lareau 1988). Whites, as the dominant race in American society in general (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Feagin 2000; Frankenberg 1993; Mills, Doane, and Bonilla-Silva 2003), and the corporate sector in particular (Bell and Nkomo 2001; Pierce 2003; Reitman 2006), set the normative standards for appropriate values, beliefs, and behaviors. In other words, whites generally have more influence over the dominant culture in mainstream American institutions, and some scholars contend that whiteness itself is a privileged form of cultural capital (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Nadimpalli Reeves 2001). The extant research generally finds racial differences in mainstream cultural capital (Carter 2005; Eitle and Eitle 2002; Lewis 2003; Yosso 2005), although there is some evidence that socioeconomic differences explain much of the racial gap (Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999).⁶ Later in this paper, I define cultural capital more specifically as it is used in this research project.

Second, as noted earlier, cultural capital is a resource that must be activated by individuals in social interactions and social networks. As such, research finds that race and sociocultural interests play key roles in the formation of social networks that, in turn, lead to workplace success. Homophily research finds race to be a strong factor in the formation of networks in the workplace (Ibarra 1995), and the most salient factor in the structuring of social networks overall (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001). Studies of corporate culture and the workplace underscore the importance of homophily at work. Kanter (1977), for example, found that managers seek to hire employees who are similar to them culturally and socially, and evaluate managerial candidates based on their performance at social outings outside of work time,

⁶ I reference “mainstream” cultural capital because some scholars contend that blacks do not possess less cultural capital than whites, but rather alternate forms of cultural capital that are not recognized by dominant whites (Carter 2005; Yosso 2005). While this may be the case, the focus here is on cultural capital that is valued in the white-dominated corporate sector and other mainstream institutions.

including activities that often require demonstrating certain cultural abilities (e.g., playing golf and hosting dinner parties). This creates a cycle of social closure (Weber 1978) which leads to the exclusion of those with different backgrounds. Indeed, workplace social networks tend to have a high degree of homogeneity in terms of race, class, and sociocultural factors (Anderson 1999; Stuber 2005). Importantly, social familiarity affects success within the workplace, particularly in situations where social ties are important for the accumulation of knowledge and skills (Blair-Loy 2001). Further, studies have found a backlash against Affirmative Action policies and, thus, successful blacks in the corporate sector, which could lead to further exclusion from important workplace networks (Anderson 1999; Pierce 2003). Collectively, this research suggests that blacks (or anyone who is more socially distant from the dominant group in a social context) may be hampered in their ability to activate cultural capital in relevant social contexts.

Third, cultural capital is heavily influenced by social class, which is highly intertwined with race in American society (e.g., Wilson 1978; Wilson 1987). More specifically, Bourdieu contends that cultural capital is attained through two sources: one's family (i.e., *habitus*: a set of internalized dispositions developed through one's family socialization) and education (Bourdieu 1984; Lareau 2003). Race shapes both sources in a significant way (Smelser, Wilson, and Mitchell 2001). Thus, cultural capital provides an excellent framework for examining racial inequality, as well as the intersecting effects of race and class.

Racial inequality in the workplace

The corporate workplace provides a promising site for the application of cultural capital theory to the study of racial inequality for two reasons. First, while many occupations remain segregated (e.g., Tomaskovic-Devey 1993b; Tomaskovic-Devey, Zimmer, Stainback, Robinson, Taylor, and McTague 2006), the workplace is likely the site of much interracial contact, given

the extent of social and residential segregation in American society (Vallas 2003). Second, the work sector remains a site of much racial inequality, and I contend that this framework offers a compelling alternative to existing explanations for racial disparities inside the workplace.

Racial inequality persists in the workplace. Blacks earn less than whites in the short term and over the life course (Cancio, Evans, and Maume 1996; Maume 2004b; Smith 2001; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993b), face a “glass ceiling” that limits opportunities for promotions (Maume 1999; 2004a), are more likely to suffer downward mobility from white-collar occupations during shifts in the economy (McBrier and Wilson 2004), possess less workplace power and authority than whites (Elliott and Smith 2004; Smith 2002; Wilson 1997), and are likely to receive lower performance ratings from their supervisors than white men (Ilgen and Youtz 1986; Kraiger and Ford 1985). Significantly, black workers also still face hostility, discrimination, and negative stereotyping in the workplace (Anderson 1999; Coombs and King 2005; Feagin and McKinney 2003; Kaplan 2006; Pierce 2003; Roth 2004b; Simpson and Cohen 2004). Despite arguments that find class to be a more significant factor in inequality than race (Bonacich and John 1980; Burawoy 1982; Rosenfeld 1980; Wilson 1978; Wright 1997), blacks are clearly disadvantaged at work.

Research on racial inequality at work has mostly focused on the broader social forces that affect how jobs, wages, promotions, and other work opportunities are allocated by race. These factors include: job- and occupation-level segregation (Maume 1999; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993b; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2006), organizational composition (Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999), job availability in urban centers (Holzer et al. 2001; Wilson 1996; Wilson 1987), companies’ hiring strategies (Neckerman and Kirschenman 1991), and job seekers’ social networks and social capital (Fernandez and Fernandez-Mateo 2006; Smith 2005).

While this literature is essential for revealing patterns of racial inequality at work, it fails to explain much about *how* racial inequality is reproduced in the workplace. These studies – generally structural in theoretical approach and quantitative in method – are largely unable to identify the social and interactional mechanisms underlying racial disparities at work, leaving researchers to speculate about important relational processes (Reskin 2003; Vallas 2003). The movement toward more structural, survey-based research has occurred for a number of reasons, including a lack of access to corporations, and an inclination, inspired by the work of William Julius Wilson (e.g., Wilson 1996; Wilson 1987), to focus on the social forces that affect the availability of work for urban blacks (Vallas 2003).

In short, we have learned much about *why* racial inequality exists in the workplace, but know little about *how* it is produced and reproduced. Prominent sociologists of work and organizations lament this gap in knowledge and have drawn attention to the need for more innovative, qualitative approaches that investigate relational, interactional processes at work and focus on the mechanisms that produce inequality (Collins 1997a; Cornfield et al. 1998; Edelman, Fuller, and Mara-Drita 2001; Elliott and Smith 2004; Reskin 2003), including an examination of cultural capital (Vallas 2003). In particular, sociologists need to examine how race (and gender and class) are “done” or performed (Jackson 2001; West and Zimmerman 1987) at work, and affect workplace relations and individuals’ opportunities for inclusion, success, and promotion. By looking *inside* the workplace, and by examining sociocultural interactions that occur once individuals are employed in a firm (as opposed to research on job acquisition), this paper answers the call by identifying an important mechanism in the reproduction of racial inequality.

The literature on racial inequality inside the workplace generally focuses on three complementary causes. The first is occupational- and job-level segregation. Blacks are often

channeled into racialized jobs, positions that are frequently marginalized and devalued because they have ties to the black community and/or are not occupied predominantly by whites (Collins 1997b; Jones Jr 1986; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993b; Williams 2004); spatial segregation within the workplace may exacerbate these effects (Vallas 2003). The second is homophily, the tendency for people to associate with others like themselves (see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001 for an excellent review). Homophilous processes lead managers – very often white males – to hire and promote workers similar to themselves socially and culturally; which leads to the exclusion of minorities from vital internal resources and networks (Bielby and Bielby 1992; Erickson, Albanese, and Drakulic 2000; Ibarra 1997; Kanter 1977; Roth 2004a; b). Third, blacks are often stereotyped or stigmatized in the workplace, leading to a host of negative consequences including black workers feeling isolated and alienated, and being viewed as only fit for certain types of racialized jobs (Anderson 1999; Bell and Nkomo 2001; Collins 1997a; b). In short, job segregation, homophily, and stereotyping combine to limit blacks' chances for workplace success, mobility, and access to internal networks.

While studies on these three causes have added much to our understanding of racial disparities at work, they suffer from a common weakness that limits their explanatory power. In short, this literature fails to explain the interactional, relational mechanisms underlying job segregation, homophily, and racial stereotyping, leaving unanswered a wealth of important questions in the process. What happens to black workers once they are in racialized positions, and what happens to those whose are in more mainstream positions? What is the sociocultural substance that drives homophily, especially given that, for example, all white males are not alike as the research seems to assume?

In other words, workers do not interact in a vacuum, nor do they respond to each other solely based on ascribed characteristics. It is important to know the substance and context of work-related social interactions in or outside of the workplace – i.e., *what* are individuals talking about with their coworkers and *where* are they interacting? – especially given that research has noted the role culture plays in connecting individuals at work (Erickson 1996) and in society in general (DiMaggio 1987; Feld 1981; Fiske 1987; Lizardo 2006). By not exploring the substance of workplace interactions, what is left is basic racial discrimination, an explanation that some leading scholars in work and organizations are trying to move away from (e.g., Reskin 2002). Similarly, others argue that discriminatory processes in the workplace are subtle and progressively harder to document (Acker 2006), and that the very nature of racism is changing and becoming less overt (Bonilla-Silva 2003). A cultural capital approach that centers on the content and context of sociocultural interactions at work corrects for these limitations in the literature.

Further, this literature falls short on both ends of the structure-agency debate. Research on homophily and stereotyping generally struggles to offer a critique of the racial workplace inequality at a structural level. While homophily and stereotyping imply a larger structural bent – i.e., racial stereotypes are rooted in structural inequality – larger issues of social class, exclusion, and power, as well as the interplay between structure and agency, are neglected. Conversely, arguments based on segregation into racialized jobs fail to recognize the agency of black workers, and are unable to explain those who are successful and/or upwardly mobile. This is particularly important given that studies suggest signs of progress for black men in terms of obtaining management positions (Maume 2004a), and note the successes of certain types of diversity programs for black men and women in management (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006).

A cultural capital approach takes structure into account by defining the dominant institutional culture and how it is constructed, and considers agency by examining how employees activate their cultural capital in certain social contexts.

As noted earlier, the cultural capital framework holds promise for the study of racial inequality in general because of its emphasis on exclusion and power, dominant cultural norms and values, social networks, and social class; these points of emphasis make it a compelling approach to the study of racial inequality inside the workplace as well. Further, previous cultural capital research has shown that individuals' success in mainstream institutions, such as the school system, is not due solely to quantifiable performance (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2003). Rather, actors are rewarded for knowledge and behaviors related to informal standards and expectations favored by the dominant culture of the institution – these informal standards are generally influenced by class, race, and gender.

Likewise, research has found that workplace success is determined in part by certain cultural competencies – playing golf or knowing the appropriate manner in which to act at an expensive restaurant, for example – that enable some employees to be evaluated more positively (Erickson 1996; Kanter 1977; Kaplan 2006; Stuber 2005). Notably, the higher employees rise in a work hierarchy, the harder their performances are to quantify on an individual basis (Dornbusch and Scott 1975). Approaching workplace inequality from a cultural capital perspective facilitates the examination of these other pathways to workplace assessment and success, and provides insight into a key mechanism of work inequality.

In summary, cultural capital theory provides a robust and flexible model for examining mechanisms of workplace inequality that involve race and culture – importantly, this model goes beyond previous explanations of racial inequality at work (job segregation, homophily, and

stereotyping) in explanatory power. The extension of cultural capital to a study of workplace inequality is supported by Lamont and Lareau (1988), who specifically noted the potential of this framework for studies of work inequality, as well as leading scholars in the sociology of work and organizations (Reskin 2003; Vallas 2003).

Research questions

In a previous paper from this project, I identified the forms of cultural capital valued inside a major corporation, with a focus on cultural capital that provides access to increased workplace social capital, opportunities for mobility, and other valued work resources. I also discussed the advantages gained by corporate employees with greater degrees of cultural capital. These findings are summarized in the next section.

In this paper, I examine how race affects the possession and activation of cultural capital in the corporate workplace. Specifically, are black employees disadvantaged in terms of cultural capital and if so, how? Do white employees have an advantage in these processes because of their race? Is there an interaction between race and class? An examination of these questions is important for understanding broader processes of racial inequality, as well as adding to our insight of workplace disparities.

ADDITIONAL METHODS NOTES

When discussing the results, I note the interaction of race and class in my findings. I determine social class through a combination of self-reported education, family income, current occupation, and family class background. Individuals that I identify as middle-class have college degrees and family incomes over \$50,000, and generally come from at least a lower-middle-class background; most have at least some managerial experience at Aimco. In one instance, an

interviewee did not have a college degree and was not in a managerial position, but was married to a physician and described herself as middle-class. I define working-class employees as those who do not have a college degree, have family incomes less than \$50,000, and who are employed in positions in the lower one-third of Aimco's hierarchy; all of these employees come from working-class family backgrounds as well.

Culture and race at Aimco

The company struggles with diversity. Although official demographic reports of Aimco's employees were not available to me, reliable internal estimates placed the company's percentage of professional jobs filled by blacks at roughly 5%. (I define "professional jobs" as those that require a college degree or significant professional experience, which includes most of the white-collar jobs at Aimco with the exception of positions in the call center and customer service departments. For the most part, these jobs do not offer much in the way of a career path at the company.) The majority of Aimco's non-professional jobs are occupied by blacks – likewise, the majority of Aimco's black employees work in these positions. There are just two blacks in the top echelon of Aimco's upper management, which is comprised of roughly 30-35 executives.

Two years ago, the executive management team announced increasing diversity as a major goal for the company, creating committees to study the issue, and issuing a directive that a "diversity candidate" must be included for interviews of any position above a lower middle management level. Significantly, while the company officially defines diversity broadly – i.e., in terms of ethnic background, management and communication styles, and personal differences – it is operationalized in hiring processes and company events strictly in racial and ethnic terms.

Aimco employees I interviewed were forthright with criticisms of the company's handling of diversity, with their complaints taking three forms. First, black participants expressed frustration

with the lack of blacks in upper and executive management positions, as well as insincere or poorly-handled attempts at dealing with diversity (e.g., “ethnic” lunches to celebrate black or Asian culture). Second, blacks and racially progressive whites criticized Aimco’s minority recruitment, stating that the company does not endeavor to attract quality minority candidates. This induces frustration when employees feel forced to interview diversity candidates that do not appear qualified, thus dooming efforts to increase diversity to failure. Third, some white employees believe that the company’s emphasis on diversity gives too much latitude to blacks who are unqualified or perform inadequately. Despite these issues, race relations overall at Aimco appear to be mostly positive.

Defining cultural capital at work

An important aspect of cultural capital theory is that different types of cultural capital are valued in different contexts – what is valued is determined by the dominant group in a given institution or “field,” to use Bourdieu’s terminology (Hall 1992; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Swartz 1997). For example, while knowledge about the fine arts might serve as cultural capital among societal elites, Erickson (1996) found this to be less useful in a work setting than knowledge about popular, mainstream culture, which was important for connecting employees across class and managerial boundaries. Lamont and Lareau (1988) contend that before discussing the effects of cultural capital in a given context, researchers must first document its valued forms: i.e., what are the various ways in which individuals are evaluated in a particular context (with a focus on informal methods of evaluation), and how does an individual’s social location affect their ability to meet these expectations?

In the first paper from this project, I documented three forms of cultural capital that are significant for success and advancement at Aimco, a large, multinational corporation

headquartered in the Midwest. The first form is *knowledge about informal expectations and an understanding of the importance of the company's sociocultural realm*. From executive management down to entry-level workers with college degrees, there is a consensus that employees cannot succeed at Aimco without knowing about and participating appropriately in certain sociocultural activities (as further defined in the next paragraph). Knowledge about the importance of the informal culture, as well as the rules that govern it, is vital: one cannot play or win a game when one is not aware that it exists or is worth one's time.

The second form of cultural capital valued at Aimco is *the ability to participate in and navigate a range of informal social events*, including happy hours, loosely organized nights at local pubs or restaurants, and co-ed sports teams. These informal activities are important for increasing visibility and access to supervisors and decision-makers, sharing informal knowledge about the company, and demonstrating more of one's personality and "real self" outside of the workplace.

Third, *knowledge about a variety of mainstream, popular culture topics (i.e., being a "cultural omnivore")* serves as an important form of cultural capital at Aimco. Being conversant in a wide range of topics is necessary for getting along with coworkers and for navigating social interactions with supervisors and key decision-makers. Topics that dominate conversation at this company include sports, parenting/family issues, reality television shows, fashion, and exercise/nutrition. Whereas cultural capital research began with a focus on high-status culture in France (Bourdieu 1984), more recent in American settings confirms the importance of knowing something about a range of culture, particularly in regard to popular culture topics (Erickson 1996; Lizardo 2006; Peterson and Kern 1996).

Possessing and activating cultural capital can lead to important advantages. Aimco employees report that participating in the company's informal culture can help increase one's visibility and access to supervisors and decision-makers, a particularly important aspect for those in low-visibility positions or who report to an unsupportive supervisor. In addition, informal social activities serve as a setting where informal knowledge about the company is shared, and where employees have opportunities to bond and demonstrate more of their "real self" outside of work situations. In short, the company's informal culture realm is composed of sites where work gets done, introductions are made, impressions are formed, networks are expanded, and information is shared. Employees without the types of cultural capital valued at Aimco fall behind.

RESULTS

Overview

Based on my analysis of the data, I find a strong relationship between race and cultural capital at Aimco. This relationship varies by social class for blacks: black employees are disadvantaged in cultural capital-related processes at Aimco, but the form of disadvantage depends on their class and location in the company hierarchy. Middle-class blacks are disadvantaged primarily in terms of activating the second and third forms of cultural capital noted previously (participating in social events and being a cultural omnivore), whereas working-class blacks tend to not possess the first form (awareness of the importance of the company's informal culture). Whiteness, on the other hand, is a clear advantage in terms of cultural capital at Aimco.

Middle-class blacks at Aimco

Middle-class blacks at Aimco possess cultural capital but face obstacles in its activation. That is, middle-class black employees firmly understand the importance of the company's sociocultural domain – the first type of cultural capital described above – but often feel unable to activate their cultural capital. These employees are limited in their ability to activate cultural capital by two related processes: (1) a white-dominated corporate culture that requires assimilation in order to succeed; and (2) methods of exclusion that are both overt and subtle.

First, black middle-class employees feel that to succeed at Aimco, they must assimilate to Aimco's dominant corporate culture – which, as I explain shortly, is dominated and maintained by whites – and cross a personal line that they are not willing to cross. Blacks must assimilate primarily in terms of ways of interacting and communicating, as well as partaking of the sociocultural interests and activities that are preferred at the company. Subsequently, they feel that their social and cultural styles of interacting are not appreciated or rewarded at Aimco. This results in a form of race-specific sociocultural exclusion that disadvantages black middle-class employees at the company, particularly in regard to the second form of cultural capital valued at Aimco: the ability to participate in and navigate a range of informal social events.

Tara, a black middle-manager⁷, described how blacks who want to succeed at Aimco must assimilate into the company's white-dominated culture:

They want you to assimilate. I don't care what they say. I think they want diversity in numbers but at the end of the day if you are diverse, they want you to leave that stuff behind. They want you to assimilate. You can go down to Howard University (a historically black university) and recruit someone here, but they'd better assimilate into this culture. I'm only willing to go so far. We were talking about this the other day. I haven't quite hit my threshold, but I'm close to it.

⁷ There are relatively few blacks in management positions at Aimco, so I am not providing more personal details about Tara in an attempt to protect her anonymity as much as possible.

Abby, a black middle-class woman who works in a lower-ranked position than Tara, echoed her comments:⁸

She (Tara) couldn't have said it better. I don't care what they say. There was a white manager in my department that made a statement, and I will quote "No one here cares about diversity." You have to assimilate or you won't make it. As an African-American, I have to figure out how to walk the fine line.

Level of comfortability with diversity is part of it. And even though that is promoted here the first day you come in as part of your orientation, at the end of the day people are who they are and you make a choice as to whether I'm going to crawl out of my little box and try something different or not.

Tara, Abby, David (a black professional quoted later in this paper), and other black middle-class employees defined assimilation in a variety of ways: being involved in work-related social outings rather than spending time with their families, eating lunch with people "that you really don't like, just because you know it's an important thing to do;" working out at the company gym; not challenging Aimco's leadership; interacting at work in a more restrained manner (which one participant explicitly noted as a "more white way" of acting, as opposed to black being "more emotional and outgoing"); modeling the actions and attitudes of the company's upper management; and steering clear of controversial social or political issues during discussions. I should add that two white middle-class employees who view themselves as quite different from the typical Aimco employee – Trevor is a punk rock musician who openly mocks much of the corporate culture, and Melissa is an outspoken lesbian – both noted their struggles to assimilate to the company's culture as well.

⁸ I interviewed Tara and Abby together. This was the only instance in which I formally interviewed more than one person at a time. I had scheduled time to talk with Tara onsite at Aimco, and at the last minute, she asked if it would be acceptable to bring Abby along. Tara thought, based on our initial conversation about the interview, that Abby would be able to provide some interesting insights.

Tara's and Abby's comments are representative of the experiences of the middle-class blacks I interviewed: all five of the black middle-class employees I talked with gave similar responses, and four of the five felt that their statements represented the views of their black middle-class peers as well; comments to the effect of, "yes, we all see it" were common. While some were not as direct about this issue as Tara and Abby, all noted race, and whiteness in particular, as a major influence on the company's culture.

Some participants, such as Josephine – an older black, middle-class professional who works with outside clients – attributed the whiteness of Aimco's culture to the fact that whites are clearly in the majority at the company. She noted that her department was completely white for years until she joined; she also commented that despite Aimco's stated goals of diversity in her nine years there, that many departments are still mostly or completely white and that race "is not equally distributed throughout the company." Other participants observed that Aimco is no different than most other major corporations in this regard, and that this is simply the state of corporate America. A comment by Jacqueline, a black project manager in her mid-30s, was similar to remarks made by other middle-class blacks at Aimco:

I think that when you look at corporate America, it's clear and it's open – you see it no matter what. Women see it, black, white, all people of colors. If you look at the face of corporate America you see a white male. That's just clear.⁹

Significantly, some whites I interviewed echoed these sentiments as well, observing that their black peers have larger challenges than themselves in terms of interacting and fitting in with Aimco's dominant culture. In short, there is a consensus that the valued cultural capital at Aimco

⁹ There is evidence of race and gender intersectionality, as many describe the dominance not just of whites in general, but of white males in particular. Although intersectionality is not the focus of this paper, it will be explored elsewhere in the larger research project.

is dominated by the styles, attitudes, and preferences of white management, and those who wish to succeed must conform and blend in. This leaves black middle-class employees feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome in certain social settings at the company. *Conversely, not one white participant noted feeling uncomfortable because of their race.*

Second, black middle-class employees are often excluded from key sociocultural processes by both overt and subtle means. Tara went on to discuss the importance of cultural capital at Aimco, while also noting the mystery behind it, describing it as an “X-factor” (and making quotation marks in the air with her fingers to emphasize the vagueness of it):

In speaking with different people in higher management through some other activities I’m involved with at this company, I found that in terms of advancement and what they consider for advancement, a large factor is this “X Factor” they speak of. I am a large objector of the “X Factor.” The “X Factor” is not something that’s based on performance because they always expect you to be great at the job you do. It’s some amorphous thing they look at which I think comes down to likeability and I don’t like likeability because it can be influenced by so many things that are so out of your control. One of which, I think, is being part of the group.

I’m dealing with it a lot now because I’ve been dealing with some other coworkers in some activities I’m involved in here. How do you get that “X Factor?” I honestly really don’t know. I’m always nagging upper management about, “You went out, but you didn’t ask me.”... I don’t know how you crack that. Do I have to learn how to play golf? Do I have to learn how to smoke cigars? Do you do those things to get ahead?¹⁰

Tara provides evidence that middle-class blacks are not only sometimes excluded from important cultural capital-related activities at Aimco, but the substance and rules of the “X factor” are kept secret from them as well. Tara is interested in upward mobility in the company and is willing to do things (to a point) to advance, but is unsure of what is required in terms of the informal expectations. She knows there is a game to be played, but she is not told the

¹⁰ Tara’s comments about golf and smoking cigars demonstrate the issues of race and gender intersectionality mentioned in the previous footnote.

informal rules and is not sure if she understands them correctly – hence, her ability to compete is hampered. What is particularly compelling about Tara is that she struggles to learn the rules despite her background: she was raised in an upper-middle-class family by parents with graduate degrees and professional jobs, and her parents made a concerted effort to increase her general cultural capital by having her, for example, study abroad, take piano lessons, and learn to play tennis. Tara was likely the most accomplished black middle-class employee I interviewed – yet, even with her privileged background, graduate degree, and professional accomplishments, she still struggles to navigate the informal culture at Aimco. Clearly, black middle class employees with less cultural and human capital than Tara might struggle even more.

Jacqueline offers further evidence that black middle-class employees struggle with exclusion. She was one of this project's first interviews participants. At the time, she was relatively new to Aimco's headquarters (though not to the company itself, having worked in the field for years), and was very optimistic about Aimco and her chances of success and mobility. Nearly two years later, she expressed a much different view, noting:

I've basically lost hope that I'm going to get promoted. Shannon (her supervisor) and Dan (VP of the division) don't even think of including me. They and their circle are so used to working together and doing things together socially, that I'm not even on their radar any more. I don't really know what I can do.

It is important to remember that power and exclusion are key aspects of the cultural capital framework – in fact, American cultural capital research has been criticized for generally overlooking these dynamics (Lamont and Lareau 1988). A substantial characteristic of cultural capital is knowing the informal rules and expectations. The dominant group in a particular field or context – whites, and often white males, in Aimco's case – not only sets the rules, but restricts access to this informal knowledge. By guarding knowledge of these informal processes, the

achievements of more privileged individuals is explained in terms of sheer ability or hard work, and thus their success is legitimized (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Lareau 2003).

The cultural capital framework has been criticized as simply another form of a deficit model, such as the “culture of poverty” argument, that can ultimately be used to blame the disadvantaged (Crompton 2006). However, this framework clearly considers the structural nature of the reproduction of inequality through its emphasis on power and exclusion. Middle-class blacks at Aimco are not lacking in cultural capital – rather, they are often unable to activate these resources in the appropriate contexts, particularly the informal social settings I have found to be important, because they are excluded, either actively (i.e., simply not being invited or included) or covertly (i.e., being made to feel unwelcome). Tara’s frustrations underscore the cultural capital framework’s issues of power and what Lareau and Horvat (1999) describe as “moments of exclusion.”

The subtle, covert characteristic of these processes is particularly important to note, as very few of this study’s black participants accused the company of outright racism or discrimination. Rather, they found the exclusion to be indistinct and often hard to put into words. This is precisely what makes cultural capital, with its emphasis on informal knowledge and expectations, such a difficult process of inequality to document, particularly for researchers who are not focused inside the workplace.

Management: how are boundaries drawn?

A careful distinction must be drawn in regard to *how* access to important informal knowledge is protected by those in power. At times, this knowledge is guarded proactively – i.e., while white male managers at Aimco have intentionally rebuffed Tara’s efforts to join their social ranks, they invited a young white man to join their social and exercise circles. Although the

race/gender calculus is not always simple – e.g., a white male participant complained to me about his exclusion as well – only black middle-class employees claimed race as a cause for their exclusion.

At other times, informal knowledge remains off-limits through what I would describe as “benign neglect.” That is, some managers simply assume that employees know the informal rules, and appear genuinely unaware that some individuals may not understand the importance of the informal culture. Thus, employees who understand and participate appropriately in Aimco’s informal culture are rewarded, and those who do not are assumed to be less interested in success and upward mobility. Comments by Jane, who has served on the executive management team for many years, underscore this point. Jane emphasized that the informal cultural rules and “fine line advice” are very important for success, but are also not openly explained:

I think you find somebody who mentors you and helps you, like, “Hey so-and-so, let's do lunch, I want to tell you some things you should be looking at and aware of”...that kind of thing. Maybe your peers who you sit next to you or your boss will explain it to you. Otherwise, it's sink or swim, I think. I actually think there should be a book about rules. I don't think people come into the company knowing those rules. It's definitely trial and error.

Jane agreed that blacks (and women) “have a tougher time” finding managers or mentors to explain the informal culture, largely because of the white male dominance of the culture, but she was unwilling to attribute these differences to racial discrimination or overt exclusion on the part of Aimco’s managers. Rather, Jane believes that upper management’s stated emphasis on diversity is genuine, but feels that they struggle with implementation. The company’s ineffective diversity program leaves many managers uncertain as to what is required to help minority employees, or possibly unaware that they need to do anything at all. (This issue is complicated by Aimco’s weak recruiting efforts for quality minority candidates, a complaint echoed by both

black and white Aimco managers.) Further, Jane feels that that white men are more likely to enter the company with some knowledge of the informal rules, leading white male managers to find it easier to work with them. Although Jane believes that blacks face more difficulties at Aimco than whites, she believes that it is possible for blacks to succeed, especially if the company continues to refine and strengthen its efforts toward greater diversity.

Jordan, a white male senior manager in his thirties, is a prime example of the uncertainty and lack of awareness that Jane describes. Jordan is “the future of the company” according to one executive I spoke with, and was promoted to one of the most visible positions in upper management during the course of this project. He has a reputation of being one of the most progressive, fair, and friendly members of upper management, and I found him to be engaging and sincere when discussing diversity and ascriptive inequality at Aimco. Yet, as I will describe next, Jordan was quite surprised by issues related to cultural capital and inequality that arose near the end of our formal interview.

Jordan recognized the importance of Aimco’s informal culture, but also argued that there are alternate means of connecting with or impressing managers. Jordan stated that he is willing to help anyone who is interested in getting ahead:

If someone from a lower level – anywhere in the organization, and even if I don’t know them – schedules lunch with me, I’m going to have lunch with them. They can ask me anything they want and I’m going to be honest with them. And if they want me to help them along in terms of their career development, I’m happy to do it. I think several of the leaders are that way.

Again, Jordan seemed sincere in expressing his willingness to help and advise employees who are lower in the company’s hierarchy. However, he was taken aback when I noted that lower-ranked employees might be hesitant to ask a high-ranking manager such as him for his time and advice. I explained that even with his positive reputation, employees might not be

aware that it is acceptable to ask a superior, especially one outside of his or her department, for help (this is an important form of cultural capital in the corporate sector). I also described my observations on why many black employees felt excluded or unwelcomed in Aimco's informal culture, and thus felt uncomfortable approaching white managers without the connections and familiarity gained in those settings. Jordan expressed his surprise over these observations, and vowed to do better in this regard, while asking for my advice on how he might proceed.

Employees: an example of the "X factor"

The intangible aspects of social interactions can be difficult to discern and describe. Although black respondents gave a firm sense that black middle-class employees are made to feel excluded through various means, what remains unsaid is exactly how this exclusion occurs. What makes the black middle-class employees I interviewed feel unwelcome or excluded? What are the verbal or nonverbal cues that signal their exclusion?

First, it is important to recall that cultural capital consists of a range of sociocultural behaviors, attitudes, and styles – for example, Bourdieu's early research identified how displaying certain styles of communicating and speaking favored by middle-class teachers positively affected the educational outcomes of privileged students in France (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Likewise, certain styles of communication are valued at Aimco, and this provides a strong example of how blacks come to feel excluded or unwelcome at the company.

A certain manner of comportment is valued at Aimco, and middle-class blacks feel that their willingness to speak frankly and challenge opinions harms them in this regard. All but one of the middle-class blacks in this study feel that their frank, outspoken manner of communication is not received positively by white managers in the company. Ultimately, this impairs the ability of middle-class blacks to participate freely in informal sociocultural settings (the second form of

valued cultural capital) and to display cultural omnivorism (the third form). While it is possible that white managers perceive the communication styles of middle-class blacks to be too assertive or not deferential enough, it appears more likely that middle-class blacks are simply going against the grain in terms of the company's predominant styles of communication. Thus, the communication styles of middle-class blacks, which might serve as capital in other settings, are not valued as cultural capital at Aimco. This also serves as an example of how blacks feel they need to assimilate to succeed at the company.

David is a black professional with a role that is not managerial, but is fairly visible in terms of the variety of departments he interacts with on a regular basis. David, who appeared to be calm, reserved, and soft-spoken when I interviewed him, described how he was told by his supervisor that he can be intimidating. While he blames this partly on stereotypes of black males, he ultimately sees this as a result of his communication style:

Historically, just being a black man you intimidate people. I don't understand why but that really is it – they're scared to death if you went to college and you're an outgoing person like me. I mean I actually was told that I could intimidate people. I thought it was funny (laughs). I'm like, "I don't intimidate you, you're just insecure about yourself." I can't intimidate you unless you let me. That didn't go over too well.

Actually my director, when I told him that –he was talking about "you know you intimidate people." I said, "how?" I said, "because I ask questions that no one else will ask? I can't help it." That was my upbringing. I was told to ask questions. If you don't ask a question you'll never know the answer. That's what he really said....but I'm gonna ask you a question. If you're gonna make some changes you have to tell me why. You can't just do them because you woke up and decided, "well, I'm gonna make a move today." It doesn't make sense to me. I think those are probably some of the factors.

David also described a meeting where he challenged a higher-ranking peer in his department:

I mean that's like I'll say, "you're not god." He just looked at me. I said, "You're not! Contrary to what you think, you're not." You make mistakes and I can point out some but, you know...yeah, sometimes I talk too much (laughs).

Josephine, an older black woman in a non-managerial professional role, made similar comments. She finds that her boss disapproves of her frankness and is put off by her willingness to speak with anyone and not be intimidated by their position in the corporate hierarchy:

Some of the issues that I...my suggestions are not very well taken. It's sort of a clash between us then. I've had to speak to him on several occasions about some of the comments that he's made, you know, that I didn't appreciate. But nobody else would say anything to him. I don't play like... I don't do that. I'm going to put you on the spot if you put me on the spot. So we have a little conflict going on right now.

He always asks how I know so many people outside of our department. That was very surprising to my boss. "How do you know them? How do you know the VP of this area?" I was like, "because I know him, you know... he's no different than I am so why shouldn't I know him?" I just go up and talk to him...just like he puts his pants on one leg at a time like I do or my husband does, so he's no different than anybody else to me.

(Later in the interview) African-Americans are more expressive sometimes than Caucasian people. That's just how we are, you know, and if you haven't...if you've never been around it, it could be very scary to people.

Josephine and David both believe that their honesty and willingness to speak up and challenge supervisors' opinions (especially when no one else in their department is willing to) has caused problems for them. Further, they both believe that the problems they've encountered because of this frankness is due in part to their race – i.e., they recognize that their behavior does not match the expectations of the company's white-dominated culture. While all but one black middle-class employee I interviewed made similar comments, only one white study participant made a similar comment, and she did not tie this issue to her race.

These examples provide a glimpse into the mechanisms behind the exclusion of middle-class blacks at Aimco. By possessing a communication style and orientation that is not favored by the mostly white management, black middle-class employees are perceived as lacking in a key aspect of the dominant cultural capital at Aimco: i.e., the manner in which successful, team-

oriented employees are expected to act. Notably, this relates back to the comments from Tara and Abby about “how far I’m willing to go” and “walking a fine line.” Although the black middle-class employees I interviewed recognize that they may be harming their chances of success by being challenging and outspoken, they are not willing to give up this manner of communication and assimilate into the dominant culture.

Working-class blacks at Aimco

Working-class blacks are disadvantaged at Aimco, but for a different reason than their middle-class peers. These employees suffer from a lack of knowledge about the company’s informal expectations and the importance of the sociocultural realm. The response of Toni – a young, black, working-class clerical worker – demonstrates this lack of awareness. Toni stated that she does not like to associate with coworkers outside of work and does not feel the need to do. When I asked why she felt this way, she responded:

Um, I am a very private person and I don’t like too much mixed worlds. So when I leave work, I like to leave work at work. Not that I have anything personal against any of my coworkers - we get along great while I’m there - but while I’m at home, I want to focus on my family, I want to focus on my friends...you know, try to relax and rest and unwind from the day and...I think sometimes when I’m around my coworkers, if I’m not at work, it’s still making me think of work-related issues and topics and I don’t want to talk about it. And that’s normally what happens when you’re away from work with at least one of your coworkers. It’s like you can’t get away from it. After 5pm is *my* time.

Toni recognizes that some of her coworkers may get involved in social activities in order to be seen, but does not feel that one needs to be active in sociocultural interactions in order to succeed. When I asked how she plans to advance at Aimco, she responded by describing traditional means of doing so: through hard work and possibly taking college-level classes or additional training; getting more involved in the company’s sociocultural realm was not part of

her plan. Toni's definition of after-work hours as "her time" and her clear separation between work and personal time is similar to the clear school/family divide Lareau found in working-class families, as opposed to middle-class families, who had a much more fluid boundary between school and home/family (Lareau 2003).

Her responses were typical of her black working-class peers. Doris is an older, black, working-class woman in a low-ranked position. She described how she attends some of the company's official events, such as the annual holiday party, in hopes of being seen and meeting people who might be able to help her, but she does not get involved with informal activities because she does not see the point:

I'm kind of straightforward -- if it's something I don't want to do, I'm not going to do it. Because sometimes it doesn't matter. You gotta pick and choose when you should do something you really don't want to do. Meaning that, you can go into something knowing that no matter what you do, it's not gonna get you where you want to go. So why do you need to do those things?

And then there are those things where you say, "oh well, if I do this, I can see that it's a possibility that it may help me get where I want to go." So then you do those things. You know? But for the majority, I feel like, it's never a case where doing something that you don't want to do just because it's going to get you somewhere, I don't think that happens...as an African-American, I don't think it happens. I think people have already chosen who they want...you may be cool with your white counterparts, but at the end of the day you're not going to be who they choose. So if they're gonna choose, they're going to choose me on my own merits, things like that.

Doris has a very clear-cut idea of what constitutes networking and what does not. For her, going to an official company event is a chance to be seen by management outside of her department. However, she does not have a strategy for networking at these events – it is simply a matter of being seen and hopefully getting to talk to people who might be able to help her. Further, she does not at all see the benefit of being involved with coworkers at a more informal

level where, ironically, the more helpful forms of networking and information-sharing are likely to take place.

It is also interesting that Doris has a sense of resignation about her race, noting that because she is an African-American, "...at the end of the day you're not going to be who they choose." This contrasts with the views of many of the middle-class blacks at Aimco, who feel that race is less of an issue than race-related mechanisms (e.g., the comments above about styles of communication), gender, and class. Tara, for example, was willing to get more involved in the company's sociocultural realm, but was frustrated by her lack of knowledge; Doris, on the other hand, just does not see the point.

Black working-class employees are further disadvantaged by working in primarily racialized jobs that are segregated socially and physically from the company's mainstream. As described earlier, Aimco displays the job segregation patterns typical of large corporations: most of the black employees are in lower-ranked positions, including a large call center that is mostly black and is located in a separate facility from the rest of Aimco's main offices; these positions are clearly racialized. Thus, not only are working-class black employees unaware of the importance of Aimco's informal culture, but they are also less likely than other employees to come into contact with potential mentors or guides, or to be in sites where they can learn by following the examples of others.

To be clear, it is difficult to decompose the effects of race and class on this issue, as I lack a clear comparison group to my working-class black participants. I was only able to interview three whites in lower-ranked positions (i.e., in the bottom one-third of the company's hierarchy); all three are women. Two of the three do not have college degrees, but are from middle-class backgrounds, have educated spouses, and appear to be middle-class in the present; the third is

from a working-class background, but has a college degree, and is far more well-versed in social and cultural issues than the black working-class participants. Also, as opposed to blacks working in racialized, dead-end positions, whites who have lower-ranked positions often have college degrees, and have either a clear plan for advancement or are not interested in upward mobility because they seek a low-stress job with fewer demands.

White employees at Aimco

To this point, I have focused my attention on the circumstances of black employees at Aimco. This is due mainly to my finding no evidence whatsoever of whites being disadvantaged in the possession or activation of cultural capital because of race.¹¹ Other factors outside of the focus of this paper – such as gender, class, work/family conflicts, and sexual orientation – sometimes prohibit white Aimco employees from succeeding in cultural capital-related processes, but not the color of their skin.

The majority of this study's white participants claimed that race does not matter, with many following up this claim to add that Aimco's diversity efforts insure that blacks get a fair shake. Very few whites acknowledged that whites have an advantage at the company. These views that are typical of whites, who generally do not recognize the privileges that accompany the color of their skin (Bonilla-Silva 2003; McIntosh 2001). Some whites interpreted my question, "how does race matter at Aimco?" in negative terms, pointing to "diversity candidates" who did not perform as strongly as their white counterparts. Further, some felt that Aimco goes too far with emphasis

¹¹ Also, by focusing primarily on black middle class employees, this paper follows the tradition of previous research that focused on the struggles of the black middle class despite its members having the requisite human capital to succeed in mainstream American institutions (Anderson 1999; Collins 1997a; Cose 1993; Pattillo-McCoy 1999).

on diversity. Comments by Jeremy, a white middle-class professional in Aimco's middle tier, typify the responses of many whites at the company:

I think the company wants to be the most politically correct place they can possibly be. Frankly, I don't think race matters at all. I think they welcome that. There's a case of that in my department where someone was advanced a couple levels into a position that no one thinks they deserved. I think that's where a lot of us are pretty liberal thinkers and we're open-minded, but when you see stuff like that happen...this person's reputation is that they really don't do their job well at all. They advanced right into a position that someone else could have had. There are people in my department waiting in line for that title that are doing a great job but they aren't there. It makes you wonder.

However, whiteness is clearly an advantage at the company. Claims by whites that race does not matter at Aimco are countered by the responses of black employees and some white managers, as well as the reality that management at the middle and upper levels is heavily dominated by whites. Only one of Aimco's 11 senior executives is black; out of roughly 20 to 25 executives at the next step down of upper management (vice-president and senior-vice-president positions), just one is black. As noted earlier, roughly 95% of Aimco's professional jobs are occupied by whites. A white senior executive commented on the difficulties blacks face at Aimco (while also noting the combined effects of race and gender):

I think it's tougher for them. First of all, you don't have as much hope that you are going to get ahead if you're not a white male. I mean, if you're a white male you're going, "hey, look at those guys in charge of the company, I can be one of them!" (laughs) If you're a woman or if you're an African-American, forget it. You can see that there are very few African-Americans in our executive management.

A white middle manager reaffirmed the importance of race while commenting on the company's white-dominated culture and leadership:

We're a vanilla company even though we want to be seen as more diverse than we are. White people are our leaders. White people set the tone. I think we have black employees who are our poster children for success and advancement. They're trotted out as examples of how "easy" it is to get ahead in the company. Nice try, but it's not

enough to break through the white barrier. However, I will say I think we try more than other companies. What's lacking is listening to the hard truth and then really working for change.

Experiencing Aimco's white-dominated culture

In sum, Aimco's white-collar sector and leadership are predominantly white, and although some white respondents claim that race has no effect at the company, other whites, including some in middle and executive management, recognize that Aimco's culture is dominated by the cultural attitudes, styles, and preferences of whites. But what does this mean in terms of lived experience? How is this "white-dominated culture" experienced by employees? My participant-observation experiences help illustrate the whiteness of Aimco's culture.

Significantly, every informal company outing I participated in took place in settings that were overwhelmingly white in terms of their geographic location and crowd. These social outings occurred in bars or restaurants in three parts of the large metropolitan area where Aimco is located: the white, upper-middle-class suburb in which Aimco's offices reside; the downtown business district area; and Parktown, an affluent neighborhood located within the city limits that is populated primarily by white, young professionals. The bars and restaurants tended to be moderately upscale and were populated mostly with young professionals dressed in the business casual clothes they wore to work (if it was a happy hour) or nicer casual clothes (no t-shirts and jeans) if we met later in the evening. The crowds in these establishments, generally 50-100 people on average, were usually almost completely white – in fact, when black Aimco employees were there, they were frequently the only non-whites there. As one black female participant noted to me, "no one ever asks or volunteers to hang out near where we live." Etta noted that while it made sense to visit bars or restaurants near Aimco's headquarters, her fellow

employees never offered to organize an outing in the establishments or neighborhoods favored by black employees, nor would they be likely to come if invited.

Etta's comments reflected a cultural divide observed by other black participants: Doris attempts to learn about Bruce Springsteen, but notes that her co-workers do not care about Jay-Z; Thevala does not talk about certain black cultural productions, such as rapper Flavor Flav's show on the MTV network, with her white peers because she understands that they "don't walk away with the same feelings because they don't have the same shared experiences, (and) haven't lived in the black neighborhoods like we have;" Jacqueline takes offense when a white manager tells her she is "the whitest black person he's ever met" because she likes country music; David describes a work meeting that turned contentious when he objected to a white coworker's reaction to a high-profile crime story involving a black teenager.

It is true that many of the cultural topics that are discussed at Aimco's informal gatherings – reality TV shows, family events, and the local professional and college sports teams – are not clearly racialized; although as a recent ESPN/ABC News poll showed, even seemingly benign topics, such as black professional baseball player Barry Bonds' chase of the career home run record, can engender a racial divide (ESPN.com 2007). But it is also true that cultural products, artists, and interests more associated with black culture – including even well-known, more mainstream examples such as Jay-Z (hip-hop), Wynton Marsalis (jazz), Dave Chapelle (comedy), or an entire league such as the National Basketball Association – are less likely to be discussed (and viewed as a form of cultural capital) in Aimco's informal sociocultural settings. Jay-Z may be more famous and artistically relevant than white singer Dave Matthews, but the latter is certainly more likely to come up in conversation in these settings.

It is not as if blacks at Aimco are particularly surprised by the company's culture: many made comments along the lines of "it's corporate America, it's white, it's what you would expect." But they also continue to some times feel alienated in this culture, a feeling that is exacerbated by the company's ham-fisted attempts at promoting diversity (such as featuring black-eyed peas, cornbread, and other traditional African-American dishes during "African-American culture week") and their white coworkers' apparent unwillingness to meet them halfway and learn more about, for example, black authors or performers. The "default whiteness" of Aimco's informal culture becomes tiring.

In short, blacks' feelings of alienation – combined with whites' numerical dominance at Aimco and the tendency to host informal gatherings in exceedingly white settings – produce an level of social distance and strain that whites do not have to negotiate on a daily basis at Aimco. This is a classic example of white privilege (McIntosh 2001): Aimco's whites simply do not have to be concerned with their race, while blacks are confronted with it on a regular basis, *particularly* in the company's informal culture. It also lends support to Bonilla-Silva's (2003) notion of a *white habitus*, a racialized socialization process, caused by whites' social and spatial isolation, that influences whites' perceptions and feelings about racial matters. Whites do not have to face or even recognize the reality of being the only person of their race in a pub, a pub one feels to be compelled to be in for work reasons; blacks do.

Nearly every employee at Aimco has impediments that keep them from participating in the informal culture as much they might want or need to. As I noted above, participants noted how gender, class, work-family commitments, and sexual orientation all affect their ability to participate in Aimco's informal culture. Race is clearly important in this regard, and thus, whites at Aimco have one less significant barrier to negotiate than blacks while navigating the informal

sociocultural settings that are important for success and mobility at the company. This barrier reflects a dynamic that Aimco's diversity efforts are not equipped to address, thus leaving quite a gap between the company's stated goals and the reality of its culture.

It is important to note that in Aimco's informal culture, the conversion of cultural capital into actual benefits or resources (e.g., a new node in one's work network, information gained about an important new project, an opportunity to impress a member of upper management) is rarely instantaneous. In other words, discussing the Chicago Bears with an executive will seldom result in an immediate promotion. Instead, conversion is an ongoing process requiring repeated displays of cultural capital in front of decision-makers or key peers at strategic moments. In this sense, Aimco's black middle-class employees are disadvantaged by their diminished presence and involvement in the company's informal culture, which is due to overt exclusion or their reluctance to participate in an uninviting social context. Notably, I observed black middle-class employees participating in Aimco's informal social outings, but rarely with the frequency and duration of the whites who were most successful at activating their cultural capital and "playing the game." Consequently, Aimco's black middle-class employees continued to be disadvantaged in this regard.

Previous research has suggested that whiteness may be a cultural resource whites can draw upon in certain contexts (Lareau and Horvat 1999; Nadimpalli Reeves 2001), and that race affects the cultural capital that is valued in adult work contexts (Kaplan 2006). This study's findings provide further evidence for the influence of race on cultural capital, a resource that has previously been explored almost exclusively in terms of social class. I find that whites determine the cultural knowledge, styles, behaviors, and attitudes that are favored at Aimco, and that the whiteness of Aimco's culture clearly disadvantages blacks in terms of activating cultural capital.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I used data from interviews and participant-observations to demonstrate that cultural capital theory is a useful theoretical framework for inquiry into racial inequality. By situating this study in an institutional context such as the headquarters of a major corporation, I was able to first identify the forms of cultural capital valued in this context, and then examine how race affects the possession and activation of this form of capital. In doing so, I demonstrated how cultural capital theory allows for considerations of both structure and agency.

I found that black corporate employees are disadvantaged in terms of cultural capital, and that the form of disadvantage varies by class. Middle-class black employees are limited in their ability to activate their cultural capital by working in a corporate culture that is defined and dominated by whites, and that necessitates their assimilation in exchange for success. Black middle-class workers are also excluded from important sites where cultural capital is activated through means of exclusion that are sometimes subtle, other times overt. Working-class blacks, on the other hand, are disadvantaged in the possession of cultural capital, particularly in regard to knowledge about the company's informal culture and rules. It's a classic case of "not knowing what you don't know" – i.e., these workers are mostly unaware of the importance of participating in Aimco's informal culture. I also found no evidence that whites are disadvantaged in cultural capital sites and processes because of race; rather, whites are clearly advantaged in this regard in the corporate setting.

Some critics of the cultural capital model have argued that it is simply another way to blame the disadvantaged, similar to the manner in which the "culture of poverty" arguments were used to blame poor, urban blacks. This criticism, however, overlooks the structural aspects of this theoretical framework: cultural capital is used by the dominant group in a particular setting to

exclude others and preserve rewards for others like them. In Aimco's case, white members of middle and upper management define the cultural capital valued at the company. The success of blacks' efforts at agency hinges, in large part, on their ability to traverse and negotiate this white-dominated cultural structure. While the majority of cultural capital research has focused on the role of class in exclusionary processes, this paper shows that race is a factor as well.

Some would argue, for example, that Aimco's middle-class blacks are to blame for not being willing to "cross the line" and do *whatever it takes* to be successful. But this also begs the question of why and how workers are evaluated for non-performance issues – that is, a meritocratic institution such as the workplace claims to reward workers for their quantifiable performance, and not for how they behave at a happy hour, blend in to the organization's culture, or demonstrate knowledge about sports. The black middle-class workers I interviewed are regarded as solid performers and, in some cases, were openly recruited by Aimco's management. If an employee's performance is adequate or better, why should she or he be forced into participate in sociocultural situations in which s/he is not comfortable or feels excluded? White employees do not face this dilemma, at least for racial reasons – black employees do.

It is interesting to consider the effects the white-dominated culture has on white managers. I provided evidence that while some managers may not have malicious or exclusionary intentions, the reality is that they are ill-equipped to recognize how their whiteness affects their decision-making and evaluations as they apply to Aimco's informal culture. White managers are also unaware that some employees – black employees, in this case – may struggle with cultural capital at the company. This leads to a profound gap between Aimco's stated emphasis on diversity and the reality as it exists within the company. As such, this echoes Reskin's (2003) contention that sociologists concerned with inequality should focus on the internal mechanisms

that generate inequality rather than the motives of those in charge. In short, the motives of managers appear to matter less than the embedded culture of the company.

Regardless, it is important to ask why company managers do not take a more active role in mentoring the working-class individuals who report to them, particularly when they are keenly aware, at least in some cases, that these workers do not “know the rules.” Black working-class employees are further disadvantaged at Aimco by working primarily racialized jobs that are segregated socially and physically from the company’s mainstream. Not only are they unaware of the importance of the company’s informal culture, but they are less likely than others to come into contact with fellow employees who may guide or mentor them, or to be in sites where they learn by example, because of job-level segregation.

It is important to note that most employees, both black and white, feel that Aimco provides a positive environment and is a good place to work. It seems fair to say that even Aimco’s harshest critics are driven not by a disapproval of the company, but rather by frustrations over wasted potential – this is particularly true in regard to the fact that Aimco states that diversity is a priority, yet its efforts have resulted in few clear improvements for blacks and other minorities. Further, few black employees find the company or their coworkers guilty of outright racial discrimination. Thus, my findings may understate the impact of race and cultural capital at less racially progressive companies.

There are some limitations to this study. First, my findings are based on a relatively small sample from just one company. Thus, the generalizability of the paper’s findings are difficult to assess. This is particularly true in regard to discussions of race and class intersectionality, as I had a somewhat unrepresentative sample of white working-class employees. However, it is worth noting that some seminal studies in the sociology of work and organizations were based on

similar research sites and samples (e.g., Hochschild 1997; Kanter 1977). Second, my findings are based primarily on interview data, and I was not able to observe employees in their actual work environments. While I made every effort to triangulate my findings through interviews, observations, and discussions with my informant, the fact remains that I was unable to observe employees at work. Last, I do not have access to measures of work performance, but this form of data may not have helped, as cultural capital affects how employees are evaluated, and the higher one goes in the hierarchy, the harder it is to quantify an employee's performance and disengage it from the performance of the larger organization.

This paper makes significant contributions to the literature in three areas. First, it demonstrates the usefulness of cultural capital for the examination of racial inequality, as well as its relevance for studying contexts involving adults (as opposed to the adolescent, educational settings in which it is generally applied). Identifying the valued cultural capital in various adult institutional contexts is imperative to the future of cultural capital research; this paper has accomplished this in a large corporate setting. Second, this paper adds to our understanding of racial inequality by applying a previously neglected framework. Examining the impact of race at the sociocultural level is particularly important in an era of color-blind racism, when racial discrimination has become more covert and harder to document (Bonilla-Silva 2003). Last, this study contributes to the Sociology of Work literature by focusing on a key set of mechanisms that generate inequality *inside* the workplace. In doing so, this paper corrects for the limitations of research that relies on explanations focused on homophily or stereotyping processes. While cultural capital and homophily are certainly complementary processes, I contend that the former offers a more rigorous theoretical framework for the study of inequality inside institutions.

The findings presented here suggest a wealth of future research questions, some of which will be addressed in future papers from this project. While this paper touched on questions of race and class, a more robust examination of cultural capital and the intersectionality of race, class, and gender is vital. Further, this study's findings should be extended to a larger, more representative sample involving multiple corporate sites and cities. My findings also suggest future research avenues that lay outside the confines of this project. For example, how is the dominant culture of an organization arrived at and how does it change? What forms of resistance are possible by its members?

This paper also points toward the promise of marrying cultural capital theory to research on boundaries, particularly in regard to the reproduction of inequality. My findings suggest that race, class, and gender sometimes affect how significant sociocultural boundaries are drawn; other times, sociocultural matters appear to influence boundaries drawn by race, class, and gender. The promise of boundary research has been demonstrated for race and class issues (Lamont 1999; 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002), and suggested for the examination of racial inequality at work (Vallas 2003), but I am unaware of research that combines considerations of cultural capital and race/class/gender intersectionality. Focusing on the use of cultural capital in boundary creation would strengthen both research traditions.

It is imperative to continue research of this type. I began this paper by noting the extensive racial disparities that persist despite the advances gained during the Civil Rights Era over forty years ago. Sociology has learned much about the causes of these disparities, but there is much work to be done. Research that focuses on the impact of culture, particularly in regard to the currency it carries, shows great promise for the understanding of racial inequality. It is bitterly ironic that the things that are supposed to enliven our lives – cultural interests and social relations

– are often the very things that divide us. My hope is that deeper examinations of racial divisions in the sociocultural domain will eventually help lessen our profound racial disparities.

CHAPTER FOUR: INSIDE THE BOYS' CLUB: GENDER AND CULTURAL CAPITAL AT WORK

INTRODUCTION

For women, upward mobility in a workplace or organization tends to stall at certain levels of the management hierarchy, causing women to generally have less power and authority in the workplace than white men (Catalyst 2007; Smith 2002; U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995). The concept of the “glass ceiling” has long been used to describe this trend. Although progress has been made over the past thirty years, women are still far less likely than white men to be found near or at the top of the management structure of organizations. The glass ceiling has proven to be a remarkably persistent barrier.

Previous research has relied primarily on homophily – the social psychological tendency for people to associate with others like themselves – as an explanation for the glass ceiling, claiming that white men in power prefer to surround themselves with other white men, who they are more likely to trust when important decisions must often be made quickly and with little concrete information. However, I contend that cultural capital theory offers a more powerful framework for the examination of the glass ceiling. Cultural capital theory considers how certain forms of cultural knowledge, behaviors, and dispositions help individuals gain an advantage in specific social contexts. By identifying the dominant culture of a social context, as well as how individuals respond to and are affected by it based on their social location, this framework offers a powerful lens for examinations of inequality, particularly within institutions and organizations.

What is the dominant culture of a corporation? In what way does gender influence how the dominant culture is determined and defined? How does this dominant culture affect the career

prospects of men and women differently? In this paper, I use interview and participant-observation data from a large, multinational corporation to answer these questions. I examine how gendered forms of cultural capital hinder the upward mobility of women, and contribute to the maintenance of the glass ceiling. By investigating how cultural capital matters in a corporate workplace at the everyday, interactional level, this paper provides insight into a key mechanism of reproduction of gender inequality, and demonstrates how cultural capital is a more powerful framework for the study of inequality in organizations than homophily theory.

BACKGROUND

Gender inequality in management

Women are disproportionately excluded from management positions in corporations and other large organizations. Although some progress has been made since the 1970s, women (and blacks) continue to lag behind white men in power and authority, particularly at the highest reaches of organizational management.¹² The invisible but lasting barrier that prevents women from attaining management positions, despite their accomplishments and qualifications, is described as a “glass ceiling.”¹³ This concept was popularized by a *Wall Street Journal* column in 1986, and a decade later, was the focus of a government commission chaired by then-Secretary of Labor, Robert B. Reich (U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission 1995). To be clear, the glass ceiling does not refer to overall gender-based inequality, but rather to gender disparities

¹² All references to “men” in this paper refer to white men, as black men are generally even more disadvantaged in the workplace than white or black women.

¹³ The glass ceiling is also used to describe racial barriers to managerial attainment, but this paper will focus solely on gender inequality.

that are more pronounced at higher levels of an organizational hierarchy than they are at lower levels.

Estimates of the percentage of women in management vary, depending on the data being analyzed, the manner in which “management” is operationalized (e.g., any type of management, executive management, CEO or board positions), and the industry or occupation under study. The glass ceiling has been found in a variety of occupations and industries including mainstream corporations (Catalyst 1999; 2007; Kanter 1977), science (Rosser 2004), law firms (Kay and Hagan 1998), social work (Chernesky 2003; Gibelman and Schervish 1995), state-level bureaucracies (Reid, Miller, and Kerr 2004), manufacturing (Tabak 1997), clerical and service jobs (Harlan and Berheide 1994), the federal civil service (Naff and Thomas 1994), the clergy (Sullins 2000), and journalism (Tan 1990). This unique form of inequality has also been documented in a range of occupational settings using well-known, large-scale data sets such as the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) and the Multi-City Survey of Urban Inequality (Cotter et al. 2001; Elliott and Smith 2004; Maume 2004a).

In more positive terms, women occupied 40% of the jobs defined as managerial, executive, and administrative in the 1990 Census (Reskin and Ross 1995) and 49% of managerial and professional specialty positions in the 1998 Bureau of Labor Statistics report (Solomon 2000). But the picture is bleaker at higher levels: a 2006 analysis of Fortune 500 companies found that women constituted just 15.6% of the corporate officers (defined as chairman, vice chairman, chief executive officer, president, chief operating officer, and executive vice president), 6.7% of the top-paying positions, and 1% of CEOs. Further, this study revealed that women were half as likely as men to hold “line jobs,” positions that are responsible for revenue and expenses for a major client, account, product line, or business service line; a 1999 study by the same research

group found that women held just 6.8% of all line jobs. At the current rate of change, it would take women 47 years to reach parity with men in terms of corporate officer positions (Catalyst 1999; 2007).

Significantly, a study of 1,200 executives in eight countries noted how widespread perceptions of the glass ceiling are: 70% of women and 57% of men believed that a glass ceiling prevents women from climbing the ranks in business (Clark 2006). In a study of women entrepreneurs, nearly one-third of respondents cited the glass ceiling as the reason why they left their jobs to start their own firms (Solomon 2000).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence of the existence of the glass ceiling comes from recent research using PSID data. This work uses a stricter definition of the glass ceiling, finding it to be a form of gender inequality that: is not explained by an employee's other job-relevant characteristics; is greater at higher levels of a given outcome (e.g., earnings, managerial attainment, or authority); represents gender inequality in the *chances* of advancement into higher levels; and increases over the course of a career. These studies provide evidence that women face a glass ceiling in terms of earnings (Cotter et al. 2001) and managerial attainment (Maume 2004a).

The path to the glass ceiling

The sociology of work literature illustrates several related processes that disadvantage women at work, and lay the groundwork for the construction of the glass ceiling. In essence, women must overcome a succession of barriers before they are even able to be considered for management positions. A brief review is helpful for understanding and examining explanations for the glass ceiling.

Men have long held a clear advantage over women at work in terms of opportunities, wages, promotions, and authority (Padavic and Reskin 2002), and research finds more men in desirable jobs and more women in undesirable jobs (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000). Thus, gender inequality at work begins at the hiring stage, as men often seek to protect their position of privilege. Women are generally segregated into less desirable jobs due to employer preferences, discrimination, and sex-based stereotypes about the types of work that are appropriate for women and men (Reskin 1993; Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999; Reskin and Roos 1990). Men then compete among themselves for higher-paying jobs with superior career prospects (Cockburn 1991; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993b).

Social networks also play a key role in the gender inequality in the hiring process. Employers prefer to hire through employees' networks, as this method is more efficient and less expensive than other means, and often yields information that is not easily obtained via more formal procedures (Granovetter and Tilly 1988; Marsden 1994; Pfeffer 1977). This advantages men, who generally have broader social networks than women, and leads to the reproduction of an organization's gender and racial composition (Braddock and McPartland 1987; Campbell and Rosenfeld 1985). Hiring via networks also allows prejudice and favoritism to enter into decisions regarding hires and promotions, even in the face of Affirmative Action programs designed to lessen inequalities by gender and race (Acker 2006; Marsden and Gorman 1999). Thus, the role that networks play in hiring clearly benefits men more so than women.

Women continue to be at a disadvantage after they are hired. Men receive more on-the-job training than women (Jacobs, Lukens, and Useem 1996; Kanter 1977; Lynch 1991), and are more likely to receive the kinds of higher visibility work assignments that are necessary for upward mobility (Kanter 1977). Men are also more likely than women to have mentors, which

are often critical for success at work, and to have relationships with mentors end positively (Ragins and Scandura 1997; Ragins and Cotton 1991). Further, research finds that women in line jobs receive lower performance ratings than men in line or staff jobs, and that women may be held to higher standards for promotions (Lyness and Heilman 2006). As a result of these processes, men earn more than women (England 1992; Padavic and Reskin 2002) and have better chances for promotion (Wilson, Sakura-Lemessy, and West 1999).

As noted earlier, women are often segregated into less desirable, sex-typed jobs – as a result, occupations filled primarily by women take on a lower status, and gender segregation perpetuates itself. Women in “female jobs” receive less credit for their skills compared with the skills used in men’s jobs, earn lower wages (England 1992; Kilbourne, England, and Beron 1994; Steinberg 1990), and receive fewer training opportunities than men (Acker 1990; Baron and Newman 1990; Bielby and Baron 1986; Reskin 1988; Tomaskovic-Devey 1993b). Further, an increase in the percentage of women in an occupation negatively affects women’s chances – and positively affects men’s chances – of managerial attainment (Maume 1999).

Women who are able to advance in male-dominated jobs or occupations often face hostility, harassment, and isolation (Kanter 1977), leading some to leave their jobs altogether (Jacobs 1989). Kanter (1977) originated the concept of “tokenism” to explain the effects of being a minority in a work environment. Kanter found that women in male-dominated jobs experienced more pressure and stress due to their heightened visibility, were isolated from important work-related networks, and struggled with stereotypical assumptions based on their gender. Many studies support Kanter’s findings on women and tokenism (Floge and Merrill 1986; Jurik 1985; Konrad, Winter, and Gutek 1992; Roth 2004b; Spangler, Gordon, and Pipkin 1978).

To summarize, a wealth of research illustrates the succession of barriers to success that women face in the workplace: women are more likely than men to be segregated into lower status, female-dominated jobs that pay less, offer less training, and provide fewer work opportunities to network and demonstrate their worth through visible assignments. Women in male-dominated jobs face harassment and social isolation, heightened work pressure, and stereotypical notions about their abilities.

Homosocial reproduction and the glass ceiling

It is reasonable to assume that women who manage to overcome the aforementioned obstacles, and who have aspirations of upward mobility, would be prime candidates for managerial and supervisory positions. Yet, as noted in the first section of this paper, a number of studies have documented the existence of a glass ceiling for women, even when it is held up to a stricter test than is used in most research (Cotter et al. 2001; Maume 2004a); further, this gender gap in managerial attainment actually grows over the life course (Maume 2004a). It is important to remember that the extant literature documents that there are women who are ready and able to enter management positions – that is, it is not a phenomenon that can be attributed to supply or a lack of capable female candidates. Thus, it is essential to ask: what causes the glass ceiling?

The predominant explanation in the glass ceiling literature is *homosocial reproduction* (or homophily). This line of research largely originates with Kanter's (1977) classic work, which drew on Moore's (1962) concept of "bureaucratic kinship systems" to note the importance of sociocultural similarity in managerial hires. Kanter found that positions that are higher in the corporate hierarchy are marked by increasing uncertainty in decision-making – individuals must often make quick, accurate decisions with very little concrete information. Often, there is no obvious answer, and decision-making becomes less about making the right decision than about

making the decision in the right manner. This high level of uncertainty requires interdependence and rapid communication among managers and their subordinates, job characteristics that lead managers to value trust, discretion, predictability, and shared understandings in their hires. Managers seek to maximize these traits by hiring employees who are similar to them socially and culturally. Kanter (1977) summarized the process in this manner: “The greater the uncertainty, the greater the pressures for those who have to trust each other to form a homogenous group....a higher degree of uncertainty brings with it more drive for social similarity.”

Kanter termed this process “homosocial reproduction,” because it illustrates how the demographics of an organization are reproduced through successive waves of workers. White men, who have long held the reins of power in American organizations, clearly benefited the most from these preferences for sociocultural similarity, and thus, this process has played a key role in the construction and maintenance of the glass ceiling.¹⁴ For white men in control, it is one thing to give women and minorities an opportunity for advancement, and quite another to trust someone who is socially different to make decisions that affect the bottom line. Kanter’s findings on homosocial reproduction in the corporate sector have been firmly supported by subsequent studies (Elliott and Smith 2004; Erickson, Albanese, and Drakulic 2000; Ibarra 1997; Roth 2004a; b), as well as social psychological research that reports the significance of social and cultural similarity – particularly in terms of gender, race, and shared cultural schemas – for communication, trust, and interpersonal relationships (for an excellent overview, see McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook 2001).

¹⁴ Another factor in the reproduction of white male privilege and organizational homogeneity is the tendency of organizations to respond to uncertainty with mimetic isomorphism, the practice of modeling the structures and decisions of similar organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

Roth's (2004a; 2004b; 2006) recent research, conducted twenty years after Kanter's landmark study, provides excellent examples of how homophilous processes negatively affect women in male-dominated, white-collar workplaces. Roth interviewed Wall Street financial professionals, occupations long dominated by white men, and found that homophily preferences among white male managers negatively affected women in terms of their inability to form mentor relations, access important work networks, and work on important deals and accounts. Roth's participants felt strongly that their work opportunities were hindered by their social dissimilarity from their superiors, while their white male counterparts were clearly advantaged by their social similarity to managers.

The homophily literature has contributed much to our understanding of gender inequality in the workplace, and it is notable when a prominent scholar such as Barbara Reskin (2002; 2003) argues that unrecognized homophilous processes are more to blame for gender disparities at work than the malicious actions of white males. However, the homophily literature suffers from four related limitations that weaken its power for explaining gender inequality at work.

First, homophily arguments are based on the significance of social and cultural similarity between employees and those in power, yet this literature fails to closely examine the substance and context of workplace interactions. Various studies offer brief examples of the relevance of social and cultural interests at work – such as men who golf or discuss sports together – but do not delve any deeper. By neglecting the substance and context of workplace interactions, homophily research ultimately relies on stereotypes (e.g., white men like to golf) and give the sense that individuals act primarily according to gender-based characteristics. Research reveals, however, that the substance of workplace interactions *is* important, as mainstream, popular culture topics serve to connect people at work across managerial and hierarchical boundaries

(Erickson 1996). Research also demonstrates that popular culture and the arts serve an important role in connecting individuals in general (DiMaggio 1987; Feld 1981; Fiske 1987; Lizardo 2006). Thus, the substance and context of workplace interactions cannot be overlooked or taken for granted.

The second limitation of homophily studies follows the first: by underestimating the importance of the sociocultural substance of workplace interactions, this research treats men and women as homogenous groups, and leaves the reader with a rather vague notion of what it means for people to be “socially similar.” In particular, homophily studies are guilty of implicitly assuming the homogeneity of white men. Claiming that white men have a propensity to hire those who are socially and culturally similar to themselves overlooks the many factors – such as social class, sexuality, education, social and cultural interests, family of origin, and context of interaction – that can cause differences between white men regardless of their common traits of whiteness and maleness; that white males compete internally for resources and opportunities is also overlooked. By neglecting the substance and context of workplace interactions, as well as the heterogeneity of white men, homophily research is left with conventional gender discrimination, an argument that some scholars in the sociology of work are trying to move beyond (e.g., Reskin 2002); even research concerned with basic gender discrimination would be improved by a deeper understanding of such mechanisms.

Third, although the glass ceiling barrier is strong, it is not impenetrable: one-sixth of Fortune 500 corporate officers are women, and research finds that women have made continual (admittedly slow) progress into management and executive positions over the past two decades (Catalyst 2007; Goodman, Fields, and Blum 2003). Further, recent studies note the promise of certain types of diversity programs for increasing the percentage of women and minorities in

management positions (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). Yet, homophily research fails, for the most part, to explain how some women succeed in the corporate sector – the exceptions generally identify strategies for success that work around homophily processes rather than engaging or challenging them on sociocultural grounds (Roth 2004a; b).

Last, the homophily literature fails to provide a convincing analysis of inequality at the structural level. By focusing on interpersonal similarity, and by neglecting the substance and context of organizational cultural structures, homophily studies place too great of an emphasis on the individual. Although structural issues are touched on by way of organization composition (Reskin, McBrier, and Kmec 1999) and the related processes of stereotypes, status expectations, and tokenism (Kanter 1977; Roth 2004b; 2006), larger structural forces, as well as the relationship between structure and agency, are ignored.

All told, research that focuses on homophily as the primary cause of the glass ceiling offers valuable insights, but falls short due to a number of related limitations. In particular, this literature is hampered by its neglect of the substance and context of workplace interactions, as well as its base assumption of the homogeneity of white male managers. This is a critical flaw, particularly in an era when discrimination in the workplace is increasingly subtle and harder to document (Acker 2006). Only by exploring the aspects that are overlooked by homophily research can we gain deeper insight into the social and cultural forces that create the glass ceiling and hinder the upward mobility of women at work. As I explain in the next section, I contend that cultural capital theory is a more powerful framework for examining the glass ceiling and its related processes.

Cultural capital theory

Cultural capital consists of the cultural knowledge, tastes, practices, attitudes, and goods that gain individuals advantage in certain social contexts (Bourdieu 1984; 2001; Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau 2003; Swartz 1997). Cultural capital is context-specific, and in mainstream social institutions, valued cultural capital reflects the preferences and values of the dominant class. Consequently, forms of cultural capital that are valued in a *Fortune 500* corporation – playing golf or being able to converse about appropriate topics at a Chamber of Commerce dinner, for example – may not gain one advantage in a bohemian artists’ community (and vice-versa). Note that while cultural capital is closely related to other forms of capital – human, social, and economic – it is a distinct type of capital that gets at the importance of an institution’s culture and informal (and often less acknowledged) expectations.

For example, Pierre Bourdieu, who originated the concept of cultural capital as part of a broader theoretical framework for examining the reproduction of class-based power and privilege, documented how privileged French students were rewarded by teachers for things such as their accent and manner of speech, knowledge about informal academic culture, and an appreciation for the arts and humanities. Bourdieu argued that French schools were not meritocratic institutions where students succeeded solely through quantifiable performance, but rather class-reproducing institutions that favored the cultural capital of middle- and upper-class students (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990). Studies on American schools have found similar results, with middle- and upper-class students benefiting from the cultural capital they, and their families, possess (Aschaffenburg and Maas 1997; DiMaggio 1982; Eitle and Eitle 2002; Lareau 2000; 2003; Lareau and Horvat 1999; Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell 1999).

This framework has also been used outside of the institution of education to examine the benefits of cultural capital in contexts including marital selection (DiMaggio and Mohr 1985), the legal system (Kinsey and Stalans 1999), cultural production (Bielby 2004), and the workplace (Erickson 1996; Kaplan 2006; Stuber 2005). Overall, examinations of this form of capital have contributed much to our understanding of the reproduction of inequality.

Cultural capital has been operationalized in numerous ways. The earliest American studies followed Bourdieu's original model by examining the impact of cultural capital – defined as involvement in highbrow arts and culture, with items measuring if students had participated in the visual or performing arts, read literature, or visited art museums or the symphony – on academic achievement (DiMaggio 1982; DiMaggio and Mohr 1985). This operationalization has been criticized as somewhat of a misappropriation of Bourdieu's original theory, as Bourdieu may have intended for cultural capital to be defined as highbrow culture only for examinations of French society (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lareau and Weininger 2003).

Rather than adhere faithfully to Bourdieu's original conceptualization, Lareau and her colleagues argue convincingly that cultural capital must be defined in a given context before its effects can be investigated. This line of reasoning contends that cultural capital research must: identify the expectations – particularly the informal ones – by which actors in a given social context are evaluated; and examine the cultural resources actors possess and activate in order to meet these expectations, with an emphasis on how an individual's place in the social stratification system affects her cultural resources and ability to activate them (Lareau and Weininger 2003).¹⁵ More recent research has successfully used this approach, with an emphasis

¹⁵ Activation refers to the fact that individuals must know how to skillfully use their cultural capital in the right contexts and at the right times. A card game is a helpful analogy here –

on understanding cultural capital as a resource that can be converted into advantage, and is defined and controlled by the dominant group in a particular institution or context (Carter 2005; Erickson 1996; Kay and Hagan 1998; Lareau 2003; Lewis 2003). Investigating, rather than presuming, the relevant content of cultural capital in the context in which this study takes place (a large, multinational corporation) is a significant aspect of the research project from which this paper is drawn.

Cultural capital and gender

Bourdieu's research and writings on cultural capital and inequality dealt almost exclusively with social class. His work has been soundly criticized for his neglect of gender (DiMaggio 2004; Hall 1992) and his conceptualization of it as a "secondary" principle (Bourdieu 1984). Moreover, feminist scholars took issue with early cultural capital research on gender for its claim that cultural capital benefited women mainly by aiding them in attracting successful husbands (Bourdieu 1984; DiMaggio 1982). Despite these somewhat inauspicious beginnings, later work successfully integrated gender into the cultural capital framework, both theoretically (Laberge 1995; McCall 1992) and empirically (Davies-Netzley 1998; Dumais 2002; Hagan, Zatz, Arnold, and Kay 1991; Hall 1992; Kay and Hagan 1998; Nadimpalli Reeves 2001).

But why should we expect gender differences in cultural capital? Given Bourdieu's emphasis on social class, why is it reasonable to shift our attention to gender? Some research on gender and cultural capital (Dumais 2002; Laberge 1995; McCall 1992) focuses on Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, which is the way we internalize social class, primarily through family socialization in

possessing a good hand of cards is of no value if one does not know how to play the cards skillfully according to the rules of the particular game being played. Likewise, possessing cultural capital is of little use if one does not know how to use it in the correct manner (Bourdieu 1976; Lamont and Lareau 1988).

the childhood and adolescent years. Bourdieu contends that these internalized dispositions toward society and culture affect the way we behave and interact in social contexts, and thus, habitus is ultimately the key to the reproduction of the social class structure (Bourdieu 1984). Given that gender differences in socialization are well-documented (Maccoby and Jacklin 1974; Raley, Bianchi, Cook, and Massey 2006), using habitus to assess the effects of gender differences in cultural capital – on grade school success, for example (Dumais 2002) – is certainly a sound approach.

However, while some scholars have gone to lengths to reconcile feminist and cultural capital theories without distorting Bourdieu's original work, particularly in regard to habitus (e.g., McCall 1992; Skeggs 2005), this paper uses a more straightforward approach. That is, it is reasonable to consider the effects of gender on the possession and activation of cultural capital without relying on explanations that involve habitus. Habitus is an extremely useful concept for explaining, for example, why male high school students have greater professional aspirations than their female peers (McClelland 1990) or why middle-class adolescents generally have more positive outlooks toward learning than working-class students (Lareau 2003). But examining cultural capital in successful professional women is far different than examining gender differences in habitus at the adolescent level. In this research setting, habitus is essentially controlled for: that is, in examining the glass ceiling, this paper focuses on women who are educated, skilled, and politically savvy enough to have advanced up the corporate ladder to the threshold of management. The professional women interviewed for this project have clearly used their cultural capital for something more substantial than attracting a successful husband, as early research on gender and cultural capital claimed. In short, these women would not even be in this

research project if the gender aspects of their habitus had limited their career prospects as Bourdieu might have argued.

Further, Erickson (1996) argues convincingly that habitus is less important when considering cultural capital in the workplace. She contends that because workplace cultural capital is composed of mainstream tastes and not elite culture, any necessary skills and attitudes can be learned in adulthood. Erickson argues that class is not destiny – I contend that the same is true of gender. Habitus-based arguments with research on adults imply a certain futility – how easily can you unlearn or overcome your socialization? – whereas research that focuses on how women are affected by and interact with a cultural structure dominated by white men can provide insight into the fundamental mechanisms of the reproduction of inequality (Reskin 2003), and offer possible solutions to gender disparities.¹⁶

To reiterate, the sociocultural knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors that are valued as cultural capital, and lead to various advantages, are defined and controlled by the dominant group in a given social context. In the majority of American corporations, including the one in which this study takes place, the dominant group is white men, who occupy the majority of management positions and heavily influence the corporate culture (Bell and Nkomo 2001; Pierce 1995; 2003; Reitman 2006; Reskin 2000). Accordingly, it is important to investigate how professional women – those with the skills, education, and ambition to move up the corporate ladder – respond to and are affected by the male-dominated corporate culture.

¹⁶ In addition, habitus can be very difficult to measure in a study such as this. Research that examines habitus is generally either ethnographical, where habitus can be assessed by researchers spending significant amounts of time with families (e.g., Lareau 2003), or quantitative, with researchers operationalizing habitus with several measures in a large data set (e.g., Dumais 2002).

Cultural capital and gender at work

Although the literature on gender and cultural capital at work is scarce, two previous studies are helpful for demonstrating the potential of this framework for examinations of the glass ceiling. Davies-Netzley (1998) interviewed men and women who worked as corporate presidents or chief executive officers about their views on corporate mobility and success. She found that while the men in these elite positions attributed their success to individual attributes, such as hard work and a competitive nature (while downplaying the idea of an “old boys’ network”), women recognized the importance of cultural capital for upward mobility. Women in this study noted the importance of developing similarities with male peers, and altering their dress and manner of speech when working with male elites. In one telling quote, a female respondent noted, “I talk sports, politics, read the *Wall Street Journal*. I talk what the guys do. I have to. My belief is ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’” (Davies-Netzley 1998:349). Overall, this study found the cultural capital that is valued in corporate management to be highly gendered, and a key resource for women who wished to advance. It is significant that Davies-Netzley’s respondents did not note just any characteristic that might make them more socioculturally similar to men, but rather specific cultural interests that have currency in her firm – this is a strong example of what sets the cultural capital framework apart from homophily-based research, which relies on less precise definitions of what it means to be socially or culturally similar.

Kay and Hagan (1998) surveyed lawyers in Ontario, Canada, in an effort to explain why men are far more likely than women to reach partner status. The authors found cultural capital to have a significant effect for women who became partners in their firms. Kay and Hagan operationalized cultural capital in terms of “nonfirm culture/professional dispositions” (two items indicating if the respondent was a leader in legal education or law reform) and “firm

culture/practice dispositions” (several items measuring factors such as the respondent’s desire to be a senior partner, his or her status in terms of public recognition, and if s/he was honored by a professional organization). While their operationalization of cultural capital is more work-specific than what is used in Davies-Netzley’s study or this paper – i.e., one could contend that they are actually measuring attributes that are part of a lawyer’s job – their findings nonetheless provide support for the significance of the less tangible, cultural aspects of corporate employment, as well as the manner in which they are gendered.

To summarize, this literature, along with the broader research on gender and cultural capital, provides evidence that the interests and preferences of white men dominate corporate culture, and that women who are not able and willing to adapt to these forms of cultural capital are disadvantaged in terms of their success and upward mobility. Further, the success of some women, who recognize the importance of cultural capital and use it to their advantage, illustrates the weaknesses of homophily arguments, which provide no explanation for the progress of women in social contexts that are controlled by white males.

Research questions

This paper is part of a larger research project that examines cultural capital at a large, multinational corporation. In a previous paper from this project, I uncovered the forms of cultural capital that are valued by management and provide access to increased workplace social capital and other valued work resources. Here, I investigate how gender influences the forms of cultural capital that are valued at this corporation, and consider how cultural capital is used in part to construct the glass ceiling that disproportionately excludes women from higher levels of management. Examining how gender affects cultural capital-related processes in the corporate

workplace will provide insight into an important mechanism of gender inequality at work, and provide additional support for the application of cultural capital theory to gender studies.

RESULTS

Gender at Aimco

A significant part of Aimco's business concerns the retail sector. This is especially relevant for this paper, as many of the study's participants noted, based on their experience at Aimco and similar companies, that retail – at the corporate level, not in the actual retail outlets – is known to be more progressive than most mainstream American corporations in terms of opportunities and support for women.

The women at Aimco I spoke with seem contented with the company overall, and with the opportunities provided to them. When asked about the role of gender at the company, most female participants responded positively – with the exception of comments about upper management and the glass ceiling, which will be discussed shortly. Many negative comments were framed in positive terms: i.e., women enjoy working at Aimco and believe it has great potential, and simply wish the company would do better in terms of women at the top. Not one participant in this study mentioned any form of sexual harassment or blatant gender discrimination.

Men also spoke about the role of gender at Aimco in positive terms. My questions about gender, for both men and women, began by design with a simple, broad one: “how does gender matter at Aimco?” Men almost unanimously answered in positive terms, noting the value of particular women in their department or the strong female leadership in their larger unit or division. A few men noted that they had always worked under female managers throughout their

careers at Aimco. By comparison, when asked a similar question about race (“how does race matter at Aimco?”), a number of whites immediately answered in negative terms, primarily noting frustrations about the company’s diversity initiatives.

In short, I find the gender climate at Aimco to be mostly positive. While doing participant-observation at Aimco’s headquarters, at formal company gatherings, and at informal social outings with employees, I sensed much less of a male-dominated atmosphere than at other large companies I have read or heard about, particularly in the software and legal industries. Employee gatherings at other companies tended to take on a very masculine tone, complete with disparaging jokes about women. Even prominent female managers were often the target of jokes, and their protests usually only generated more gender-based barbs along the lines of, “oh, stop being such a girl about it.” In one especially troubling episode, I read of an anecdote involving a female vice-president at a medium-sized software company who was reduced to tears by male coworkers teasing her about her post-divorce sexual relations, and whether her college-aged son was a homosexual. In addition, female employees or spouses in these companies were often reduced to the role of hostess while men held court and entertained. Rarely did male upper managers put an end to the clear gender imbalance of the work-related social outings in these companies.

Conversely, women at Aimco are generally treated with respect, both at work and in informal social settings. While Aimco has its share of gender issues, as I will describe shortly, the company strikes me as a more progressive environment for women than most large mainstream corporations. There are many strong, confident, professional women employed at Aimco, a number of whom are widely recognized as important cogs within the company. The women who agreed to be interviewed for this project were impressive for their self-assurance and candor.

Aimco's glass ceiling

The first obvious question is whether a glass ceiling exists at Aimco. Based on my estimates and observations, as well as the comments of the study's participants, it is apparent that there is a disproportionately low percentage of women in Aimco's upper levels of management when compared to the percentage of female managers in the lower levels of Aimco's hierarchy. There are also a number of women who are widely recognized as being stymied in their career progress, while male peers (who are recognized as less talented, in some cases) surge past them on the corporate ladder. Official demographic reports of Aimco's management and employees were not available to me. However, I was able to gain consistent estimates from several participants.

For analytic purposes, I divided Aimco's employee population into three tiers. My informant agreed with this classification, stating that it is similar to how employees view and discuss the company hierarchy. The bottom third of the hierarchy consists of the lowest ranked positions in the company (e.g., call center or clerical support positions) to those that generally require a college degree but do not entail the supervision of any employees. The middle tier is composed of the first level of management – generally, those who manage one or two employees (or “direct reports,” as they are known in the company) as well as a number of projects – up to the vice-presidents over large groups or divisions (GVP). The executive management team of eleven senior vice-presidents and chief officers makes up the top level of Aimco's hierarchy (or what one participant humorously refers to as “high dog row”).

Roughly one-third (estimates ranged from 30-35%) of the middle management tier is made up of women. This tier includes a variety of senior project managers in areas such as communications, marketing, and finance; directors and senior directors; and assistant vice-

presidents (AVP) and GVPs. Many of the most recognized women in the company reside in this tier, including several who participants routinely referred to as particularly strong performers. The glass ceiling begins at the upper end of this tier, however. While roughly a third of middle managers are women, only one-fifth of the women at this level work in the top four positions in this tier (from low to high in the hierarchy: director, senior director, AVP, GVP), and most of them are at the director or senior director level. For example, in one particularly large division (roughly 170 employees) that is central to Aimco's core mission, 35 employees are in the top four positions of middle management, eight of whom are women. Of those eight, seven are directors or senior directors, one is an AVP, and none is a GVP. The gender distribution of this division appears to be typical of other large divisions in the company.

Women's representation is even lower at the executive management level: only two of the company's top eleven officers (18%) are female. In summary, the percentage of women in management goes from roughly one-third at the middle tier, to one-fifth at the top end of the middle tier, to just over one-sixth at the executive level. This constitutes a decrease of nearly 50% from the middle to the top.

These findings are supported by the comments of most of the women I spoke with, who mentioned the lack of female representation at the top levels of management – often describing it as the “glass ceiling” or “the boys’ club” – as their main (often, their only) complaint about Aimco. Women, and some men, are quick to point to examples of strong female leaders who they believe have the potential to succeed in senior and executive management positions. They also note that women in middle management often have key responsibilities for the company's core business, rather than working in the sex-typed positions, such as human resources or customer service, that are often reserved for women.

In short, women succeed at the middle management level at Aimco but do not advance to higher levels of the hierarchy as often as men do. Further, both men and women at Aimco agree that there is no shortage of successful, well-recognized female candidates in the company's middle tier of management – thus, one cannot argue that the lower proportion of women near and at the top is due to a scarcity of viable candidates. Consequently, it is clear that a glass ceiling for women exists at Aimco. In the next section, I argue that gendered cultural capital plays an important role in the construction of the glass ceiling.

Cultural capital at Aimco

In an earlier paper from this project, I document the three forms of cultural capital that lead to greater workplace opportunities at Aimco. One of these key forms is *the ability to participate in, and appropriately navigate, activities in a range of informal social settings*. These activities include post-work outings at local bars and restaurants, sports-related activities (including company-sanctioned, co-ed sports teams, golf outings, exercising in the company gym alongside certain managers and executives), and less frequently, parties at employees' houses. There is a strong consensus – from entry-level employees with college degrees to members of the executive management team – that individuals cannot succeed and advance at Aimco without knowing about and participating appropriately in the company's informal culture. Significantly, eight managers (two executives and six middle managers) rated, on a 100-point scale, the relative importance of work performance and involvement in Aimco's informal culture in terms of their relative importance for success at Aimco. On average, the managers rated sociocultural involvement as accounting for 44% of employees' success at Aimco; quantifiable performance accounts for the remaining 56%.

It is important to note that at the middle management tier and above, the sociocultural activities that are vital for networking, increasing one's visibility, and maintaining a certain presence in Aimco's informal culture, tend to be more exclusive in terms of hierarchy than other aspects of the company's culture. Some social settings, such as a happy hour where an entire group or division is invited to celebrate a milestone together, are open to a broad range of employees, and offer all participants an opportunity to activate their cultural capital in front of influential managers. There is a separate group of social settings, however, that are reserved primarily for those at the middle management level and above. As one director noted, "We (managers) have to be able to associate with others at our level...you have to be able to blow off steam and talk about things without worrying what is being said."

Cultural capital and gender at Aimco

I did not set out to study the glass ceiling at Aimco – in fact, gender was a secondary focus of this research project, following race and class. However, what was both remarkable and surprising is that when I asked participants a simple question – "How does gender matter at Aimco?" – *nearly every woman at the middle management level and above responded by describing sociocultural issues and mentioning the glass ceiling for women.* Because the in-depth interviews were semi-structured, it was often the case that the gender question followed earlier questions about the social and cultural aspects of Aimco. However, even in these instances, the gender question did not directly follow the sociocultural questions – and in less structured conversations during my participant-observation stints, the sociocultural aspects often did not come up at all until after I asked about gender. Thus, I find it striking that female participants' first reactions to a question about gender were, more often than not, to answer in sociocultural terms.

In my analysis of the data, I find evidence that the more exclusive social settings that are reserved for members of middle and upper management tend to be more gendered and take on more of a male character than the settings that are open to a broader circle of employees. *Gender affects the selection and context of these settings, and this gendered nature plays an essential role in the maintenance of the company's glass ceiling.* Men occupy the vast majority of positions at the upper-middle and executive levels of management, and the informal culture of these levels is widely believed to be more male-dominated than the culture at lower levels of the company, where influential women are more likely to be found.

Women are rarely explicitly excluded at this level, but rather, often feel unwelcome or uninvited due to the heavily white male character of these activities. Women who participate more often in these circles are generally seen as being the kind of women who can be “one of the guys.” Notably, the relevant activities located outside of the workplace often take place in typically male settings: sports bars, golf courses, cigar bars, and in co-ed sports leagues, where men are the most likely to be competitive and play the starring role; in extreme examples, female managers have been invited to strip clubs or “gentlemen’s clubs.”

Wendy is a well-respected director of an important technical group at Aimco. She is college-educated and is in her mid-30s. When asked the straightforward question about how gender matters, she did not hesitate to respond:

I see a lot of “guy” things that go on whether it’s gambling or...I just had a gentleman join my team, before I had all females. Now, it’s interesting to see the guys that come over and it’s like the rah-rah guy stuff – “let’s get together and drink beers and let’s go play Texas Hold’em, you know, go to this concert or that.... rah-rah!” So it’s been kind of an interesting experience. I guess I wasn’t really exposed to that, but there are a lot of extra-curricular, guy-guy/rah-rah things that go on at this level.

Wendy followed by noting that the “guy” things she described do not inhibit her in her current role – rather, she turns this into a positive by getting men on her team to use their male-activity-based relationships to forge needed connections in other departments. But she quickly added she sees an obvious limit to how far women can advance, remarking that it is hard for women to get to the AVP level (two levels above her current role). She feels that the male-oriented culture at that level would “make it tough to be a woman with that group.” She also added that she has little hope that gender inequity at that level will change for the better in the future.

I relayed Wendy’s views anonymously to Jane, the most powerful woman on the executive management team. Jane strongly supported Wendy’s views, saying:

Absolutely. She knows that if you’re there, you have to play the game. It's important. But I would say from my experience with the higher-ups, that it was definitely the good old boys club. I think a lot of people at the company would agree that once you’ve gotten to a certain level – I’d say from AVP on up – the boys club and favoritism rules. Those guys do things together. You have to figure out what you’re willing to do and make your own way. It certainly helps if you golf! (laughs) It's what you're comfortable with I guess, and I can kind of understand that. I think the higher up you go in our company that was, to me, more apparent.

Jane made it clear that she was not opposed to doing certain things with “the boys” when she felt like it was necessary. She laughed when remarking, “I can suck up as well as anyone when I need to,” but that for the most part, it just was “not her thing” and she did not enjoy socializing that much with them. Wendy’s and Jane’s observations were substantiated by two white men – a senior director and a director – who commented on the “boys’ club” atmosphere of sociocultural interactions among middle and upper management (“there is definitely a bit of a boys’ club at my level,” said Carson, the senior director). However, both men quickly noted the successful women in the company, and stated that they believe women can and will ultimately break the glass

ceiling at Aimco. Regardless, their acknowledgement of the role of gender in Aimco's informal culture is significant and somewhat surprising, given that men generally downplay the importance of a "boys' club" and describe success mainly in terms of individual attributes, such as hard work and a competitive nature (Davies-Netzley 1998).

Experiencing Aimco's male-dominated informal culture

A recent participant-observation was typical of my experiences with Aimco social outings. Six middle managers (four men and two women), two of their spouses (both men), and myself (for a total of seven men and two women) gathered at a pub/restaurant for drinks and appetizers before attending an official company gathering later in the evening. We sat in the bar portion of the establishment, which was loud and filled with a happy hour crowd; all of the bar's televisions were tuned to sports channels. The conversation was spirited as we enjoyed a few rounds of drinks. When we were not discussing work or family issues, the discussions tended to steer back towards sports, particularly the local professional baseball team (as this outing took place in June, the second full month of the professional baseball season). As we were leaving, we ran into a group of four vice-presidents, and while the conversation was brief, it gave the Aimco employees in the group an opportunity to chat with these executives outside of the workplace.

I use this example because, on one hand, it seems somewhat innocuous – how could anyone possibly find fault with a group of managers, two of whom are among the politically progressive in the company, drinking in a bar and occasionally discussing sports? However, even this somewhat gender-neutral setting – the overall bar crowd was close to even in terms of men and women – had a male-dominated vibe given the attendees (seven men and two women, both of whom are considered "one of the guys" by male employees), discussions of sports, and the loud, boisterous conversations. Many women at Aimco would clearly not feel uncomfortable in this

type of social setting. Even though the middle managers who attended this outing are quite welcoming of others, the setting itself still took on a masculine feel. And those who did not attend missed an opportunity to share work information and network with a group of four vice-presidents.

Aimco's male-dominated management culture was especially apparent with the team I spent the most time with. Dan and Wilson – two white men in their early forties who are GVPs over groups of roughly one hundred employees each – are both known to be “regular guys,” as many participants described them, who fit the stereotype of beer-drinking, sports-watching, family-oriented men. Dan and Wilson are both into sports and cigar-smoking, and tend to enjoy drinking at informal work-related events. Of the male managers I spent time with, they were certainly the most “guy-like,” the ones you would be most likely to run into at a sports bar to watch a football game (as I did on one occasion) or hear tell off-color jokes. Other male managers came across as more refined, reserved, and professional in their interpersonal styles.

Women were not actively excluded from most of the outings Dan and Wilson organized or held sway over. However, it was quite evident that the women who participated the most were the ones willing and able to be “one of the guys.” Three particular women, who reported to Dan and Wilson directly or indirectly, seemed the most comfortable in their circle: they could talk sports, hold their own at the bar, and were not outwardly offended by off-color comments (although they all admitted privately that men sometimes crossed the line in this regard). All three women were promoted in the past year – while they are considered strong performers, it is also the case that other well-performing female employees who do not participate in this culture were not promoted. Other women – including one whose supervisor reports to Dan, and

commented that she finds him coarse and immoral – made it clear that they did not appreciate their interpersonal styles or the tone set at their outings, and generally stayed away.

While I did not find Dan and Wilson offensive or bothersome at their social outings, I fully understand why many women were less than enthusiastic about participating in their outings. Even another male manager, who reported directly to Wilson, made it clear to me that he did not especially enjoy associating with them, but felt like he needed to participate to remain in the favored circle. He remarked that, “the vibe is too insular, too male, and too mean” (in terms of mocking employees outside of their clique). Tellingly, when I conversed with women in these settings, the topics veered towards sports, drinking, or other topics that were more masculine in character. On the contrary, when I conversed with other women in other Aimco social settings, the topics focused on their families or more stereotypically female-oriented interests like scrapbooking or shopping.

One representative episode that illustrates the male tone of these conversations occurred at Aimco’s annual holiday party. It is a large event, with generally well over a thousand employees and significant others spread out over three or four halls in a sprawling banquet facility. As is typical of such an event, attendees usually eat when they first arrive and then spend the rest of the night mingling, dancing, and drinking. I found myself in a conversation with two women employed in Aimco’s middle tier. While I did not know either woman well, I was familiar enough with them from previous gatherings to have a social conversation. Linda was enthusiastically discussing a craft party she had recently hosted, where roughly a dozen women gathered at her house to work on crafts. I let Linda and the other woman lead the conversation so I could listen and gather as much information as possible. We were later joined by two male managers from Linda’s division, and almost immediately, they directed the conversation back to

me, while asking about the local professional football team. Linda and the other participant had very little to add, and after a few quiet, awkward moments, they left to talk to other people at the party. I found this to be especially interesting given that the two male managers chose to talk to me, a non-employee, about sports, while essentially alienating the two women they worked with.

In another example, a white woman in her early 30s – who worked in the lower end of the company's middle tier and was recognized as a strong employee – told me that she hoped to advance, but realized that her chances were hindered by the fact that she was intimidated by most of the male leadership; her intimidation stemmed from her feeling that she had “nothing at all to add” to their conversations. She occasionally pointed to female employees who were more comfortable in these male-oriented settings and asked rhetorically, “how does she do it?”

The narratives provided by Wendy and Jane, and my observations of social outings led by Dan and Wilson, illustrate the predominantly male character of the informal culture among Aimco's middle and upper management. Women are not actively excluded – to the contrary, invitations are generally made to all employees above a particular level in the relevant group, team, or division (depending on how large the outing is). However, women who are unable or unwilling to adopt more male dispositions and/or go along with the male character of these outings, generally feel uncomfortable or unwelcome. Most would not accuse men like Dan and Wilson of outright gender discrimination – because after all, invitations were extended to women and men – but it seems clear that many women will not succeed or thrive in this environment, and miss opportunities to increase and activate their cultural capital.

I should note that there are some instances of the direct exclusion of women from important sociocultural settings and activities. The most notable is a group of white male managers and executives who run/jog together on a regular basis; this group came up several times in my

conversations with Aimco managers. The running group is exclusively male to the point of inviting men who are not regular runners otherwise, and *not* inviting women who are known in the company as successful runners. In another example, a black female director told me that she was willing to do certain social and cultural things to get ahead, but generally felt excluded from them, even when she made clear her desires to be involved. These instances of overt exclusion were far less frequent than the less exclusionary sociocultural contexts I described above. But it is important to mention them, so to not give the impression that Aimco is completely free of – or that I was oblivious to – more obvious gender barriers.

Cultural capital and the glass ceiling at Aimco

In the first paper from this project, I document the forms of cultural capital that are valued at Aimco, as well as the ways in which employees who possess and activate their cultural capital convert it into advantage. Aimco employees who possess and skillfully activate their cultural capital gain advantages over their coworkers with less cultural capital in a variety of ways: they gain increased visibility to managers and key decision-makers; expand their internal networks – particularly outside of their immediate department or team, which is vital in a company as large as Aimco – which leads to increased work-related social capital; acquire additional company knowledge; and enhance their ability to demonstrate more of their “real self” outside of typical work settings.

While I did not carefully track every participant’s career progress during this study, I observed a clear relationship between cultural capital and upward mobility. At least ten participants I categorized as especially skilled at cultural capital activation were promoted, or recognized as being on the cusp of promotion by their managers, throughout my twenty months of data collection. Conversely, other participants who did not possess or activate valued

workplace cultural capital remained in the same positions during this period. In short, there is compelling evidence that cultural capital is a fundamental mechanism in the reproduction of gender, race, and class inequality in the corporate workplace.

As such, cultural capital also functions as a key mechanism in the maintenance of the glass ceiling at Aimco. The company's male-dominated informal culture clearly disadvantages women at the middle and upper levels of management; Wendy's and Jane's observations illustrate the cultural difficulties women face at this level. As previously noted, it is widely believed that one cannot advance at Aimco without participating in the company's informal culture. Therefore, women who aspire to positions in the upper-middle or executive tiers of management must interact with, and possibly submit to, a culture that is more male-dominant and potentially less welcoming than the informal culture at the company's lower levels.

At the beginning of this section, I noted the general advantages gained by Aimco employees with more cultural capital. One specific and important form of the benefits gained by middle/upper level managers who possess and activate cultural capital is mentorship and protection from superiors. Aimco managers noted the importance of developing a relationship with a superior who will provide mentorship *and* defend them when mistakes are made or projects go off the rails. While it is well-documented that men have an advantage in receiving mentorship that is crucial to success in the corporate sector (Ragins and Scandura 1997; Ragins and Cotton 1991; Roth 2004b), less is known about protection from mistakes. One prominent black female middle manager told me that she has never had a mentor in the company and that, "I always feel like I'm one mistake away from being fired."

The importance of protection was emphasized by Brenda, a white, senior director of a department that is vital to the company's bottom line. Early on in a conversation that lasted over

90 minutes, Brenda noted the importance of Aimco's sociocultural domain before I even asked. Later, I asked her directly if gender differences in the culture at her level negatively affect women. Her response was direct and passionate: "Hell yeah, it definitely helps the men. Anybody who says differently is lying. It's extremely exclusive." When I asked for an example of how men gain advantages through Aimco's cultural domain, Brenda related the following incident:

There was a woman who was new to our department in a fairly senior role. She was new to this role, new to this level. She came to the director's meetings where the first thing we do is we rehash last week's business. You know, "how were the results, how is the trend doing?" And she clearly struggled at this meeting and she didn't really know how to read her numbers report. Was it right that she didn't know this? No. I think I would have done my homework and would have asked somebody for some help before I showed up at my first meeting; but this woman didn't do that. And the VP of the department – it felt like, emphasized her struggle. "Well, so what were the results?" Stumble, stumble it's this (pretending to be the other woman). "Are you sure? What about the month trends?" So, let's make her find some more numbers on the report that she's already having a hard time reading. "I'm not sure that's right, check into that."

I watched a man who's part of – not this running club – but part of the club called the "boys' network" by a few of us. (She had described earlier that they are often found chatting at work, talking about sports and other "guy things.") He got promoted to a similar position for a different brand, came to his first meeting after entering this role, starts to report his numbers, stumbles a moment or two, and the VP supplies the numbers for him. "Well, so and so you mean blah blah blah..." I am telling you, I sat there thinking this is bullshit. Now, I'm not saying I like either of these individuals better than the other. But that's unfair.

Brenda was certain that the male director described here was not considered more qualified or talented than his female counterpart, but that it was a clear case of a man who had gained an advantage – in this case, protection and assistance from a vice-president – through his participation in the informal culture at that level. The female director, by comparison, did not participate in the same sociocultural circles and did not have the same resources. Brenda was not

alone in suggesting that white men who are active in Aimco's informal culture gain more protection and guardianship as they move up through the company's hierarchy.

In addition to protection and mentorship, men also gain an advantage over women at the middle/upper levels of management in terms of visibility and opportunities. Several women pointed to men whom they feel blatantly used opportunities gained via Aimco's informal culture to advance upward through the hierarchy. Significantly, new opportunities do not go to men in general, but rather to men who participate the most in the male-dominated sociocultural domain at Aimco (indeed, three of the study's white male participants feel that they struggle with sociocultural participation, which has impeded their career progress). Women believe that men have an easier time with this at Aimco, in large part because of the male-dominated character of the informal culture. Brenda noted this, as did Tamara, a black, middle manager in her 30s. Tamara stated that "not fitting in with colleagues" is one of the two main issues that "hold people back" at Aimco. In discussing Aimco's informal culture, she added:

Not only do these kinds of activities increase visibility to managers and decision-makers, but to me, most importantly, they facilitate the belief that an associate is a part of the "team" – one whom is important in the day-to-day running of the business and one whom will take the opportunity to openly discuss ideas with other managers outside their immediate team. They can certainly be relationship-builders with others outside an associate's immediate team. I recognize that these types of interactions are critical in building internal relationships.

Gender and race matter equally from this perspective. If you are either a different gender or race, and are not socially connected with whom you work, it definitely takes longer to establish an open, respectful, working relationship...one in which communication is not guarded for fear of offending, but instead one that is candid for the end goal of achieving objectives.

For some female middle managers at Aimco, the belief that male middle/upper managers can interact with the informal culture more easily than women is accompanied by a combination of resignation and ambivalence. Three women at this management tier acknowledged that they may

need to try to be more involved with Aimco's informal culture to advance their careers, but also noted the frustration they would feel in doing so. That is, these women felt as if they would have to sacrifice their personal values to increase their sociocultural participation. When discussing gender and culture, Sonia, a white middle manager in a customer service department, noted:

If I was going to move up, I feel like I would have to change some of my values that are really important to me. That I won't do. I can't change that I'm a woman. I have people that I would interact with at that level who don't have the same values, so that comes back to changing all of that.

While female middle managers noted the frustration of having to possibly sacrifice their values in order to interact with the informal culture, not one male manager made similar comments. Compounding these women's frustrations is the potential for competition in this field: i.e., if a woman is unwilling to engage the culture, there is surely a man waiting in the wings who is willing.

Cultural capital and the glass ceiling: an example of disadvantage

Brenda, Tamara, and Sonia described well the difficulties that women face in terms of dealing with Aimco's informal culture at the middle/upper management level. One particular employee stood out as a strong example of the kind of women who are uncomfortable in these types of social settings, and whose satisfaction with work and immediate career prospects appeared to suffer as a result.

Linda is a mid-level project manager who supervises two employees; her supervisor reports directly to Dan (who was described in the previous section). I interviewed Linda early in this project – she was eager and ambitious, and made clear her desire to move up the ladder as soon as possible. She had recently joined her new department and believed that her prospects were bright, especially because of her graduate degree and her many years of experience. Nearly

twenty months later, she has yet to be promoted – while the two other managers at her level in the department have moved up – and she has expressed frustration about her career prospects.

Linda's manager noted to me that her lack of mobility is due less to her daily performance than it is to her ability to build relationships inside her department as well as with her peers in other departments. This is partly due to conflicts she has had with employees outside of her department – i.e., she is known to be less than diplomatic, especially when projects go awry. But she is also viewed as something of an outsider in her department due to her lack of participation in sociocultural activities. Linda has made it clear that she does not approve of the social environment fostered by Dan and Wilson, or of the women who go along with it, such as Shannon. Linda does not drink and would prefer to discuss needlepoint rather than football.

While Linda's discomfort with the cultural preferences favored by managers above her may not be entirely due to her gender, she is a strong example of an individual who is clearly turned off by the dominant male vibe of these social settings. Significantly, I found far more women than men who disapproved or felt uncomfortable in this type of social setting. Again, Linda's work is considered satisfactory – it is the social aspect where she is considered to be lacking. This is not to say that turning into a party animal would put her on the fast track to upper management, of course, but her reluctance or inability to participate appropriately in the sociocultural domain is clearly a hindrance to her prospects.

Exceptions to the rule: cultural tastes and dispositions

Earlier, I noted that women who are able and willing to participate appropriately in the male-dominated informal culture – particularly, women who can blend into the social setting as “one of the guys” – appear to have an edge over other women who refrain from involvement. Examples noted included the three women who are most likely to participate in Dan and

Wilson's outings, as well Jane, the senior executive, who was able to pick and choose when she needed to be involved.

To reiterate, women are rarely completely excluded from the male-dominated sociocultural domain – rather, it is constructed in such a way that women are far less likely to feel welcome or invited, or to feel as if they would know how to act appropriately (in other words, although they would not frame it in these terms, to have the appropriate cultural capital to succeed in these contexts). But what does it mean to be “one of the guys?” What enables women to successfully activate their cultural capital in male-dominated circles? Two aspects of cultural capital are significant: cultural tastes or interests, and personal dispositions.

Sports are one of the most popular topics at Aimco. Nearly every participant I conversed with, during extensive personal interviews or during periods of participant-observation, mentioned the importance of sports in the company's overall culture. Sports, in terms of being a fan/spectator or a participant, appears to be even more important at Aimco's middle/upper management level (you may recall a previous mention of the white male running club that is composed mostly of executives)¹⁷. Being able to discuss sports intelligently and persuasively is a powerful example of a cultural taste that facilitates women's involvement in the informal culture of Aimco's middle/upper management tier. Alice, this project's informant, gave a compelling testimony to the importance of sports:

Sports, of course, are huge. Football, baseball, basketball. Everyone talks sports all the time, and, as a female, if you can hold your ground in a sports conversation, the guys are impressed. Even though I am a sports fan, and enjoy running and playing volleyball, I don't have time to follow games or teams closely. So I pick up things from my husband and use those in conversations, which at least makes me sound

¹⁷ In a previous paper from this project, I identified knowledge about a variety of mainstream, popular culture topics as being a valued form of cultural capital at Aimco. Sports is high on the list of topics that participants noted as important for discussion at the company.

knowledgeable at some level. Even men who can't talk sports are probably at some sort of disadvantage as far as fitting in.

It was clear, from the many social outings in which I interacted with individuals at the middle/upper management level, that sports knowledge benefited women in these settings. Shannon, Alice, and Suzy, a third woman on this team who was successful in activating her cultural capital, were all enthusiastic participants in discussions about sports, and thus had an easier time interacting with the dominant men in these settings; women who knew less about sports were often on the fringe or, sometimes relied on their husbands to get involved in the conversations.

Further, as Alice noted, men who were uninterested in sports suffered as well. Jeremy, a talented professional in the middle tier, expressed his deep frustration about this to me. Jeremy noted that senior male managers knew he was not a sports fan, and that it essentially rendered him invisible to them: "There are some senior men that will go to certain guys, and you're in the room and it's like you're invisible. They'll just come up and say to the other guy, what did you think of that game last night? How do they know I didn't watch the game? There's a disconnect there, a severe one. It's irritating – can't you dialogue about something else?" Likewise, a gay male at the director level told me that his knowledge of sports helps mitigate somewhat the fact that he is openly gay and does not have a traditional family to discuss with his peers and superiors.

Thus, sports knowledge is an example of a cultural taste or interest that enables some women to succeed in the male-dominated informal culture at the middle/upper management level. That women can use sports knowledge to their advantage, and also that men can be disadvantaged in this area, exemplifies a key difference between cultural capital as a theoretical approach to

workplace mobility, and homophily research, which does not allow for a robust explanation for exceptions to the rule (i.e., women succeeding, some men failing).

Personal dispositions are a second aspect of cultural capital that enables women to interact successfully in male-dominated circles. While I have less data on this point than I do on sports, it is noteworthy that personal dispositions were mentioned repeatedly by both men and women when discussing the three women who broke the glass ceiling and joined the executive management team. Participants described Molly – a white, female, executive manager who one senior director described as having “broken into the boys club” – as competitive, tactical, high-powered, hard-ass, and “a bitch.” Fewer comments were made about Cicily, a black, female executive, but she was referred in somewhat similar terms.¹⁸ Notably, female managers below the executive level were also described as being competitive and assertive, so it is not as if those above the glass ceiling are Aimco’s only women with these characteristics.

Jane, the executive manager quoted earlier, acknowledged that she was different than other women in the company in terms of how she approached her job. She noted that female managers sometimes seemed to lack confidence, particularly in important meetings with men. To the contrary, Jane noted that she was never intimidated by authority and even early in her career, she would not hesitate to ask executives far above her then-current ranking for explanations or answers. She added:

I'm kind of an anomaly though. I always went on my own path. I was assertive with, “here’s what I want, here’s where I want to go next.” I was very outspoken with “here's what I think we should be doing.” You have to ask for what you want, but I think you're not getting it unless you show that you can do the job.

¹⁸ Molly and Cicily also have ties to sports. Molly was an all-star in multiple sports in high school; Cicily is married to one of the most revered former professional athletes in the city where Aimco is located.

Previous research has well established the existence of gender stereotypes – i.e., men as aggressive and decisive, women as helpful and sympathetic – and the manner in which they negatively affect women in the workplace (Heilman 2001; Kanter 1977; Pierce 1995; Roth 2004b). Similarly, research on status expectations finds that both men and women expect greater competence from men in the workplace (Ridgeway 1997). Women who aspire to corporate success must overcome this ingrained system of gendered beliefs. Jane's remarks, as well as the descriptions given of Molly and Cicily, demonstrate that adopting stereotypically male dispositions is one way to succeed. Just as privileged French students were rewarded for displaying certain upper-class characteristics in one of the classic early cultural capital studies (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990), so too are women at Aimco's higher levels of management rewarded for exhibiting dispositions typically associated with men in power.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, I use cultural capital theory and data from interviews and participant-observations at a large corporation to examine the glass ceiling for women in the workplace. By locating this study in an institutional context such as the headquarters of a major corporation, I was able to first identify the forms of cultural capital valued in this context, and then examine how gender affects the possession and activation of this form of capital.

I found strong evidence that cultural capital at the levels of middle and upper management is highly gendered and contributes significantly to the maintenance of the gender-based glass ceiling. Gender has a strong effect on the social contexts reserved for middle/upper management – men occupy the majority of management positions at this level, and as such, the culture of these contexts is generally male-dominated. While women are rarely openly excluded from

relevant sociocultural contexts, they are often made to feel uninvited or unwanted. Women who aspire to upward mobility at these ranks must adapt to the male-influenced cultural capital valued at this level of hierarchy. Two significant ways of adapting are demonstrating knowledge about sports, and displaying personal dispositions that are more typically associated with men, such as assertiveness and competitiveness.

I absolutely do not intend to give the impression that the women who succeed as managers at Aimco are only able to do so because of their cultural capital. To the contrary, the women I spoke with are clearly talented and hard-working, and are highly respected by employees at Aimco. While one cannot advance very far at Aimco solely on cultural capital, it is also true that one cannot advance very far solely on results. For the most part, putting one's nose to the grindstone and concentrating solely on work will result in career stagnation and getting passed over for promotions and key opportunities. This is especially important given that the higher employees rise in a hierarchy, the harder their performances are to quantify on an individual basis – thus, intangibles and factors such as cultural capital carry some weight at higher levels of management. Possessing and activating cultural capital is not a sufficient condition, but it appears to be a necessary one.

Likewise, I hope to not give the impression that the men in Aimco middle/upper management tier are Neanderthals with their masculine, “typical guy” behavior. I should note that I did not observe any malice on the part of men like Dan and Wilson, or of similar male managers. If they are to be criticized for anything, it is a lack of sensitivity to the company's culture and to the manner in which their personal (gendered) interests affect promotion and evaluation decisions. That said, they should not be let off the proverbial hook, either: white men

in power must continue to recognize how whiteness and maleness affect their decision-making and their organization's culture.

This study makes important contributions to the literatures on gender inequality, workplace inequality, and cultural capital. First, it contributes to the literature on gender inequality by advancing understanding of the glass ceiling – a significant and disturbingly persistent form of gender inequality – both theoretically and empirically. Previous examinations of the glass ceiling have relied primarily on homophily theory, arguing that white men in power are likely to surround themselves with hires who are similar to them socially and culturally. Although homophily research has contributed much to our collective understanding of workplace inequality, it pays too little attention to the substance and context of the workplace's sociocultural domain; assumes an unlikely homogeneity among both men and women (e.g., all white men are not alike); fails to explain the successes of women who manage to break through the glass ceiling; and does not treat the established culture of a workplace as a social structure that women are affected by. I contend that cultural capital theory corrects for these weaknesses, and offers a more persuasive framework for examinations of the glass ceiling. Whereas homophily theory relies on vague descriptions of what it means to be socially and culturally similar, a cultural capital approach identifies the specific types of culture that have currency in an organization.

Second, this paper contributes to research on workplace inequality by identifying a key mechanism that leads to the reproduction of inequality *inside* the workplace. Survey-based research has added much insight about why gender inequality exists in the workplace, but has explained less about *how* it is produced. By observing employees in their workplace, as well as in informal social contexts, I have able to examine the ongoing, interactional nature of the

production of inequality. As such, this paper goes beyond basic arguments of gender discrimination by demonstrating the conditions under which some women succeed, as well as the manner in which some men fail. While the patterns of gender inequality are obvious, one's sex does not automatically determine one's fortunes.

Last, this paper makes essential contributions to the extant literature on cultural capital. Although the literature on cultural capital and gender is somewhat scarce, I believe I have made a convincing case for the appropriateness and applicability of cultural capital for future investigations into gender inequality. Further, this study contributes by documenting the importance of locally-determined structures of cultural capital, as well as how gender affects the ability of individuals to respond to and interact with these structures. In doing so, this research attempts to pay proper attention to both structure *and* agency. Again, cultural capital is used by the dominant group in a social context to preserve rewards and opportunities for individuals they approve of. In Aimco's middle and upper management strata, white men are the dominant group who define the rules. Thus, it is compelling to examine how women's agency is affected by their ability to understand and navigate male-dominated cultural structures. The majority of cultural capital research has focused on the importance of class, but this study shows that gender is a factor as well.

There are some limitations to this study. First, the generalizability of the paper's findings are difficult to assess, due to the study's small sample. However, it is worth noting that some seminal studies in the sociology of work and organizations were based on similar samples and research sites (e.g., Hochschild 1997; Kanter 1977). Second, although my interview and observational data are rich, I was not able to observe employees while they were actually working. However, I endeavored to triangulate my findings at every step, and feel confident that

my lack of access to work settings did not inhibit the quality of my findings. Last, I do not have access to measures of work performance and thus, cannot control for performance in a statistical sense. I did, however, have many participants' assessments of the performances of other employees, and used these to guide my observations. Regardless, official measures of work performance may not have helped, as cultural capital becomes intertwined with how employees are evaluated, particularly at the middle/upper management levels that this paper examines.

This paper's findings suggest many avenues for future research. While this paper addressed the question of the gender-based glass ceiling, future studies should consider a broader examination of how gender, race, and class intersect in matters of cultural capital in organizations. This is particularly important given that forms of culture that unite people across one dimension, may divide across others; i.e., sports may allow men from different social classes to bond, but may also cause a gender divide (Erickson 1996). Future research should also consider how other factors, such as work-family conflicts and sexuality, affect the ability of employees to possess and activate the forms of cultural capital that are valued in the workplace. Further, this study's findings also should be extended to a larger, more representative sample involving multiple corporate sites and cities.

In conclusion, it is my hope that my findings will inspire more research of this variety: i.e., research that examines the mechanisms that produce inequality at the interactional, processual level; that considers how and why cultural structures affect the overall wealth and well-being of individuals; and that challenges forms of gender inequality that persisted for far too long. Research that uses a cultural capital framework holds great potential for examinations of gender inequality. It is also my hope that these findings, and those of related research projects, will find

their way back to the corporate sites in which they originated, to help shatter the gender-based glass ceiling.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

CONCLUSION

Sociological contributions

Although each substantive chapter includes a discussion of the findings, in this chapter, I will bring the dissertation to a close by reviewing its sociological contributions and common themes, and considering future directions of research for the entire project.

This research, as outlined in the previous chapters, contributes to the sociological literature in a number of ways, including examinations of: the reproduction of inequality inside the workplace through mechanisms involving cultural capital; the relevance of cultural capital theory for the study of race, gender, and class inequality; and the importance of conducting qualitative research *within* institutional settings. As such, this project makes substantive contributions to the sociological literatures in the areas of work, race, gender, class, and cultural capital. That said, I believe that this research makes its strongest contributions to cultural capital theory as it applies to the study of American institutions and organizations. It does so in four main ways.

First, this project documents the unique, locally-produced forms of cultural capital that are valued in a social context that is significant for many adults: a large, mainstream corporation. Lamont and Lareau (1988: 162), in an influential *Sociological Theory* article, described the need to document the “socially and historically specific forms of American cultural capital” as “an urgent empirical task;” they also urged the study of cultural capital in employment settings. Regardless, research in this area mostly continued to presume what constituted cultural capital in various contexts of study – generally following the lead of Bourdieu’s original model without

questioning its applicability for American contexts – or discussed cultural capital in vague terms without actually referring to its content. This study answers the call by Lamont and Lareau by using interview and participant-observation data to define the dominant forms of cultural capital in a major corporate setting. In doing so, this research illustrates how valued cultural capital can be locally-determined, and produced and maintained at the level of daily workplace interactions.

Second, this research demonstrates how cultural capital theory offers a powerful framework for the study of inequality that enables researchers to consider both structure *and* agency. This identifies the impact of structure by documenting the significance of locally-determined structures of cultural capital – and how the culture is determined and maintained by the dominant group in a given social context – as well as how individuals are affected by their structurally-determined social location in terms of race, gender, class, and their position in an organizational hierarchy. Likewise, this work considers the effects of agency by examining how individuals respond to and are affected by these cultural structures. Cultural capital is *not* a deficit model, but rather a structural model of inequality (the concept of *habitus*, which is central to Bourdieu's ideas on structure, will be discussed shortly). I contend that this research, by considering the importance of local cultural structures, as well as structurally-determined social locations, offers greater explanatory power than existing explanations of inequality at the interactional level, such as homophily and stereotyping theories.

Third, this project illustrates how cultural capital theory, when combined with an ethnographic approach, can be used to identify the *mechanisms* behind the production and reproduction of inequality within an institution such as the workplace. Previous research in the sociology of work has explained much about *why* inequality exists in the workplace, but much less *how* it is produced. This research provides insight into how race, gender, and class inequality

is generated at the everyday, interactional level by focusing on how employees use cultural capital in their daily work lives, and by observing how employees activate (or do not activate) their cultural capital at work and in informal sociocultural contexts. As processes of race and gender discrimination become increasingly difficult to document, research of this kind becomes more valuable.

Fourth, this study provides further evidence of the applicability and relevance of cultural capital theory for studies of race, gender, and class inequality. Previous researchers have focused primarily on how social class affects processes related to cultural capital. This is understandable given that Bourdieu (1984) focused on the relationship between class and culture, and that relationship's impact on the reproduction of inequality, in his original work in this area. However, the cultural capital framework provides insight into race and gender inequality as well, particularly by defining the dominant culture in a social context and revealing how that culture is racialized and gendered. Research that focuses solely on discriminatory processes based on race and gender may overlook the importance of culture and the more subtle processes of exclusion and inclusion that accompany it; likewise, research based on homophily overlooks the structural aspects of a social context's culture.

Although I have criticized studies similar to this project that rely on theories that I consider to be more limited than cultural capital – e.g., homophily, gender and race stereotypes, overt discrimination – I want to add that I ultimately see these as complementary explanations. That is, elements of homophily, stereotypes, and overt discrimination surely enter into how an organization's dominant culture is determined and maintained. But I contend that cultural capital provides a broader, more rigorous theoretical framework that ultimately encompasses these other theoretical perspectives.

Cultural capital and meritocracy

It is important to note that Aimco's employees cannot succeed solely on cultural capital – the consensus among this study's participants was that an employee might be able to advance through the corporate hierarchy mainly on cultural capital for a brief time, but that he or she would eventually be discovered as unsuitable for the demands of the position. But it is equally important to note that one cannot succeed and advance up the corporate ladder *without* cultural capital. Concentrating solely on work will generally result in career stagnation and being passed up for opportunities and promotions, regardless of how skilled an employee is. As the title of chapter two indicates, "you have to play."

Consequently, this study raises important questions about the American ideal of meritocracy as well as the ways in which individuals are subject to informal, often unspoken methods of evaluation within organizations, institutions, or other social contexts. Significantly, these informal methods of evaluation, which are typically subsumed in the cultural capital framework, are determined by the dominant group in a social context. This provides insight not only into the reproduction of inequality, but also the *accumulative* nature of inequality. This study's participants clearly exemplify how whites, men, and those from a middle-class (or above) background will have an easier time grasping and traversing the informal corporate culture than blacks, women, and those from a working-class background. The former group, particularly white, college-educated men, typically enter the company at a higher rank, and then use their cultural capital and position within the corporate hierarchy (which is key for cultural capital activation) to advance upwards more quickly and to higher positions than their less privileged peers. In the process, their initial advantages are multiplied – hence, the accumulative nature of inequality. "To the victors go the spoils," indeed.

Limitations

I have already addressed the limitations of this study in the three previous chapters. However, there are three limitations common to the larger project that are more appropriate to address here. First, while Aimco served as a tremendous research setting with many positives, the company employs an exceptionally low number of black men in professional positions (fewer than eight out of roughly 900 professional positions). I was able to talk with just two black male employees. Similarly, I would have liked to interview more white, working-class employees at the company. Both of these issues limited my ability to fully analyze questions about race/gender/class intersectionality. I will continue to seek out more participants before chapters from this dissertation are submitted to journals.

Second, this study might have benefited from a more thorough analysis of habitus. Having more information on my participants' habitus might have provided insight into the ways in which they activated (or did not activate) their cultural capital in social contexts. But habitus can be extremely difficult to measure in this type of study. Research that fully considers habitus generally takes an ethnographical approach, where habitus is assessed by researchers who live with a family for a period of time (e.g., Lareau 2003) or a quantitative approach, where habitus is operationalized via several survey items (e.g., Dumais 2002). I hope to rectify this research in future efforts.¹⁹

Third, the employment status of my informant changed and altered my planned strategy for exiting the field. Whereas my informant planned to leave the company during the course of this

¹⁹ On the other hand, Erickson (1996) argues persuasively that habitus is less important for examinations of cultural capital at work (as opposed to settings involving adolescents), and contends that the necessary components of workplace cultural capital can be learned in adulthood.

study, she has decided to remain at Aimco. As a result, I feel somewhat restrained from offering more vivid, complete descriptions of individuals, their work-related situations, and the company itself. While I have endeavored to protect the identity of my participants, as well as that of Aimco itself, I fear that more detailed descriptions would endanger my promise of anonymity. On the other hand, my informant's decision to remain with the company will provide further access to Aimco for follow-up interviews and observations.

In the face of the limitations noted here and in the previous chapters, it is important to reiterate that Aimco is a progressive company that has been recognized nationally as a top place to work. Nearly every employee I interviewed or interacted with expressed their overall satisfaction with the company and their work environments. When participants spoke negatively about Aimco, it was usually in terms of being frustrated that an otherwise positive workplace still had its issues. Notably, none of the study's participants planned to leave the company in the near future. Thus, my findings might be more conservative than I would find in a less progressive company (such as companies in the software, legal, and banking industries at which I have worked or observed).

Policy recommendations

Although I have little experience in making policy recommendations, I feel comfortable making four brief recommendations for Aimco, based on my research (which would likely apply to similar corporations as well). First, upper-level managers need to recognize the importance of Aimco's informal culture, particularly as it relates to official efforts to improve diversity. While major companies emphasize formal methods of evaluation – Aimco, for example, has a complex annual evaluation that encompasses ten areas of competency and rates employees on a 500-point scale – they generally do not explicitly recognize the importance of a company's informal culture

(some participants noted their frustration over scoring high on their annual evaluations while being repeatedly passed over for high-profile projects or promotions). Yet, as this study's findings demonstrate, the informal culture is a key setting for the exchange of information, the making of impressions, and the broadening of networks. Aimco's upper managers seem genuine in their desire for greater workplace diversity, but also seem oblivious to how the white male-dominated informal culture dooms much of the diversity push to failure. In fact, their official diversity efforts have not addressed the role of the informal culture at all. A greater awareness of its importance is a necessity for future diversity programs.

Second, Aimco must incorporate a formal mentoring program. A senior executive observed how women and minorities often struggle when entering the company due to their lack of knowledge of the informal rules, observing that it is "sink or swim" for them. As noted earlier, women and blacks often suffer from a lack of mentorship, compared to their white male counterparts. Mentors can be significant for giving advice and guidance on how employees can successfully navigate an organization's informal culture.

Third, if Aimco is sincere about its efforts to increase racial diversity, it must make a serious effort to attract more high-quality minority candidates. Managers, both black and white, expressed their frustrations over the lack of quality minority candidates, especially in the face of the company's stated calls for greater diversity. Aimco requires that every job opening above a certain level (essentially the lower end of middle management) must include at least one "diversity candidate" in the interview process. Yet, managers feel as if they are wasting their time because the company has not made the effort to attract qualified interviewees. This, too, dooms Aimco's diversity efforts to failure. As one middle manager commented to me, the company "needs to stop recruiting at the same old schools (referring to state and regional

colleges in the states surrounding Aimco's headquarters) and look for candidates at the historically black colleges, or more integrated state universities."

Last, Aimco must establish a system of accountability and responsibility for their diversity efforts. Recent research indicates that organizations that include accountability and authority in their diversity efforts – via affirmative action plans, diversity taskforces, and managers responsible for tracking and managing diversity efforts – are the most effective for retaining women and blacks in their employment ranks (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006). Without a system of responsibility and accountability in place, diversity training efforts aimed at reducing managerial bias and mentoring programs are far less effective. A genuine effort at increasing diversity at Aimco must address all four of the recommendations noted here.

Future research

The findings of this project suggest a wealth of future research questions, many of which have already been addressed in the last three chapters. I would like to expand upon two of them here. First, this study should be extended and replicated using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. A multi-city, multi-company survey would test this study's questions in multiple corporate and geographic settings, and help explain if my findings are generalizable to a larger sample. Further ethnographic studies should attempt to document the valued forms of cultural capital in other types of companies – e.g., how would the cultural capital of a hip design firm in Brooklyn compare to a large insurance company in Columbus, Ohio? Would there be commonalities, if not in content, then at least in form? In-depth qualitative approaches could help answer these questions.

This study's findings also suggest the value of extending cultural capital research with research on boundaries, which shows promise for the analysis of race and class inequality

(Lamont 1999; 2000; Lamont and Molnar 2002), and has been suggested for the examination of racial inequality at work (Vallas 2003). Research that investigates how sociocultural boundaries are drawn by race, gender, and class – and likewise, how race, gender, and class boundaries are affected by sociocultural interests – could provide insight into the reproduction of inequality, especially within organizations or institutions. This approach would be particularly helpful for studies of intersectionality, given that forms of culture may bond individuals across certain characteristics, while creating divisions among others. For example, sports may bond men across race and class, while alienating women in the process. Focusing on how cultural capital affects boundary creation would provide insight into such questions.

In closing, I am convinced that more research of this kind is vital. If sociology is to gain a greater understanding of race, gender, and class inequality, researchers must gain access to the institutions where disparities are so often reproduced, in hopes of observing the daily, interactional processes that house the mechanisms of inequality. We must learn more about how the dominant culture of institutions are formed, and provide greater answers on how the less privileged can resist or gain access to them. We must focus on structures while not losing sight of agency. And in the end, we must never forget that understanding and overcoming inequality is perhaps our discipline's most important empirical task.

APPENDIX A: DISTRIBUTION OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 1. Distribution of Participants in the Study by Social Class, Race, and Gender.

| | Black | | White | | | Total |
|---------------------|--------|------|--------|------|--|-------|
| | Female | Male | Female | Male | | |
| Social Class | | | | | | |
| Middle class | 4 | 1 | 8 | 8 | | 21 |
| Working class | 5 | 1 | 3 | 0 | | 9 |
| | | | | | | |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 11 | 8 | | 30 |

| | |
|-------------------------|----|
| Totals by race | |
| blacks | 11 |
| whites | 19 |
| | |
| Totals by gender | |
| women | 20 |
| men | 10 |

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