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**So Goes the Nation?**  
**A preliminary report on how immigration is reshaping the identities of workers in California<sup>1</sup>**

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Since 1990, immigrants and their children have been the fastest growing component of the American population (Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Pew Hispanic Center 2011). Unlike the newcomers who arrived a century ago during the last period of large-scale immigration, today's immigrants are largely non-European, a trend that is projected to persist into the future. By the year 2050, America's Latino and Asian populations are expected to triple, making up 29% and 9% of the nation's population, respectively, while the African American population is expected to only modestly increase its share of the population, from 12% to 13% (Smith and Edmonston 1997; Passel and Cohn 2008). These trends are profoundly altering the nation's racial and ethnic landscape. Until quite recently the United States was a biracial society with a large white majority, a comparatively small black minority, and a relatively rigid color line separating the two groups (Lee and Bean 2004). Today, that landscape is changing. However, it is not yet possible to know exactly how, for we do not know how today's immigrants understand social hierarchy in America, nor how they interpret their place in it, nor how they perceive themselves vis-à-vis the race/ethnicity distinction that has shaped American politics for the last 100 years.

Nowhere are the changes to the racial and ethnic landscape as profound as in the workplaces of California, where the number of immigrant workers exceeds that of every other state. In 2010, more than a third of the workforce was foreign born; up from 25% in 1990, while in the United States as a whole, the figures were 16.5% and 12.4%, respectively (Migration Policy Institute 2012). Yet, although the state's racial and ethnic landscape began to change much earlier than in the rest of the nation, even in California we know little about how today's immigrants construct similarities and differences between themselves and other groups, or how

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the arrival of unprecedented numbers of Latinos and Asians have shaped the identities of native-born workers.

Using data from in-depth interviews conducted between 2009 and 2012, this paper reports preliminary findings about the ways in which workers in California construct the boundaries that define “people like me” and “people different from me.” Our research builds on the approach used by Michèle Lamont (2000) in her study of black and white workers in the suburbs of New Jersey and New York in the early 1990s. This approach is especially well suited for getting at how immigrant and native-born workers see both themselves and the larger social hierarchy in which they are embedded. It also provides a set of comparisons against which to assess how the process of boundary construction might be changing along with the nation’s racial and ethnic landscape.

Some of our preliminary findings diverge sharply with Lamont’s findings while others are more analogous. Most strikingly, the workers Lamont interviewed were largely indifferent to immigrants but drew clear boundaries based on black-white racial distinctions; in contrast, the workers with whom we spoke were far more likely to make distinctions based on immigration status. Latinos rather than African-Americans are the most salient comparative group for the white workers we interviewed and whites are the most salient group for Latinos. This change in reference group appears to affect the type and strength of distinctions drawn by working-class interviewees. In contrast to the sharp boundaries Lamont’s white interviewees drew along racial lines, we find that whites draw much fuzzier boundaries against Latino immigrants. Though many of our white interviewees believed Latino immigrants posed a threat to their livelihood due to their willingness to accept low wages and poor working conditions, they found it very difficult to criticize Latinos for these qualities, as they are seen as closely linked to highly esteemed characteristics such as self-reliance and a strong work ethic. In contrast, Lamont’s white interviewees saw African-Americans as comparatively lazy and irresponsible. Further, the Latino immigrants we interviewed joined Lamont’s African-American interviewees in criticizing whites for lacking warmth and generosity; additionally, they drew boundaries against whites for their limited work ethic and self-reliance.

Interestingly, while Lamont’s working class interviewees drew relatively weak boundaries against “those above,” primarily for lacking straightforwardness and personal integrity, our white and Latino immigrants draw much stronger boundaries against the upper

class. Our interviewees' criticism of the upper class -- for getting ahead at others' expense and by cutting corners -- may imply a broader criticism of the US socioeconomic hierarchy. Further, while the white working-class workers interviewed by Lamont often distinguished themselves from "those below," our white interviewees very rarely discussed the poor. The Latino immigrants we interviewed, however, constantly expressed solidarity towards the worthy poor, who they believed worked very hard but remained poor, while drawing sharp boundaries against those they portray as being lazy and wasting their opportunities. Taken together, our preliminary findings suggest how much workers' identities may be changing in today's new era of immigration.

### **Existing scholarship on workers' identities in Contemporary America**

Lamont's (2000) study of American and French working-class men locates culture and morality at the center of how workers construct their class identities. In doing so, she offers important theoretical tools for the sociological study of how class is intertwined with race, especially in the U.S. Based on interviews done in 1992 and 1993, she shows how black and white workers in the U.S., and white and immigrant workers in France, draw on different national ideals in articulating their understanding of themselves and others. In the United States, she shows that white interviewees use a discourse centered on hard-work, playing by the rules, and responsibility (which she calls "the disciplined self"), while black workers use a model centered on kindness, generosity, and solidarity (which she calls the "caring self"). Moreover, white workers tend to use dimensions of the "disciplined self" to draw distinctions between themselves and black workers, while black workers typically use features of the "caring self" to draw boundaries between themselves and whites. Thus, Lamont concludes that moral boundaries operate as "moral qua racial boundaries," significantly obscuring the racial dimension of how workers draw boundaries (55). As already noted, the American workers Lamont interviewed were largely indifferent to immigrants; for French workers, however, the divide between white French and immigrant workers was much more significant, overshadowing white and black racial divisions.

Lamont provides a rich understanding of how her interviewees' moral worldviews are reflected in the class boundaries they perceive between themselves and others. Most of the

American workers in her study disentangled monetary success and moral worth when speaking of “those above.” Rejecting the dominant American public discourse that equates socioeconomic attainment with moral merit, a majority of her white interviewees and half of her black interviewees mobilized alternative measuring sticks that allowed them to categorize themselves as either above or side by side with “people above.” However, the boundary white interviewees drew between themselves and “those below” was much sharper, and, when elaborating on that boundary, white workers often did equate socioeconomic standing and moral worth. In contrast, the boundaries drawn by black workers against those below revealed a greater understanding of the structural causes of poverty, yet they also exposed interviewees’ fear of being pulled down by those with less self-control and ambition. French workers—including both white and immigrant interviewees—were unlike American workers in that they drew strong boundaries between themselves and “people above,” and weaker boundaries toward “people below.”

Ultimately, then, Lamont highlights the role of race for how American workers construct class boundaries and she indicates that white workers in particular draw less distinct boundaries between themselves and “people above” than toward “people below.” Both these findings can be read as consistent with a long line of quantitative scholarship demonstrating racial differences in the class identities of American workers and showing that white workers, in particular, are frequently disinclined to categorize themselves as working class. Several recent studies demonstrate that this remains the case in spite of growing inequality: White American workers remain almost as likely to perceive themselves as middle-class as they are to categorize themselves as working class (Adair 2001; Davis and Robinson 1988, Hout 2008), while black workers continue to more often identify with the working class (Sosnard et al., *forthcoming*, Hout 2008).

Scholars have offered alternative explanations beyond that put forward by Lamont to account for this oft-noted discrepancy between objective class position and subjective class identification, as well as for the persistent impact of race on workers’ perceptions of class boundaries. One set of explanations highlight the effect of what Mike Hout (2008) refers to as “ambiguity” and “ambivalence” on subjective perceptions of class. Hout (2008) analyzes responses to the General Social Survey and shows that workers are more likely to perceive of themselves as middle class when their income, education, and occupation are imperfectly correlated. Halle (1984)’s ethnography of relatively affluent and home-owning New Jersey

refinery workers suggests something similar, although he highlights inconsistencies in workers' occupational and residential communities as fundamental to their often incongruous identities. Specifically, the workers Halle studied identified themselves as "working men" in the factory, but "middle class" in their residential communities.

Evans and Kelley (2004) advance a reference group theory for why workers frequently categorize themselves on surveys as middle-class rather than the working class. Building on Elizabeth Bott (1957), Evans and Kelley argue that people base their views of class hierarchies and differences on the individuals around them with whom they interact. Since people tend to have reference groups that are relatively homogeneous with respect to social class, this homogeneity means that most people are indeed located towards the middle of their particular social world, helping to obfuscate their perception of class differences even if they are located in the lower rungs of the larger society. Evans and Kelley's reference group theory additionally offers an alternative explanation of sorts for the racial divide uncovered in Lamont's interviews: the white and black workers she spoke with seem to have lived in racially separate social worlds, and, thus, the reference groups on which white and black interviewees based their understandings of similarities and differences varied profoundly.

Indeed, Evans and Kelley's theory of reference groups has recently been extended to account for the greater tendency of African Americans to classify themselves on surveys as "working class" rather than "middle class." In a forthcoming study of the relationship between subjective class identities and objective class positions, Sosnaud and colleagues find that African Americans are much more likely than whites to categorize their subjective class identity in a way that is concordant with their objective social class position. In accounting for the finding, Sosnaud et al. point to the propensity of African-Americans to maintain social relations with other blacks who live in poor neighborhoods and in more insecure economic positions (Patillo-McCoy 1999) and they also note that the persistence of discrimination in housing markets, education, and the workplace is likely to reinforce blacks' sense of "linked fate" and racially homogeneous networks (Dawson 1994; Oliver and Shapiro 1996; Pager 2007; Pager and Quillian 2005).

Although this scholarship on workers' perceptions of their place in the American class structure is important and offers plausible explanations to account for the role of race in these perceptions, the inattention in this literature to the recent influx of immigrants is a weakness.

Lamont's research is a partial exception in that she explores native-born workers attitudes about immigrants but her interviews were completed almost two decades ago. There are demographic reasons to believe that increased immigration in the intervening two decades might be reshaping the ways in which workers draw boundaries between themselves and others. In 1992 and 1993 when Lamont carried out her study, foreign-born workers were a smaller proportion of the national workforce than were African-Americans. No longer. By 2010, the foreign-born labor force exceeded that of the African American labor force by more than one-third, with 16.5 % of the workforce being foreign-born and 12% African American (MPI 2012; DOL, 2011). In states like California and New Jersey, the overall proportion of foreign-born workers today is even higher (35.3 percent in California; 27 percent in New Jersey), with a majority migrating from Latin America. However, in spite of these changing demographics, little is known about how these workers construct their class identities or how the increasingly observable presence of immigrant workers is shaping the ways in which native-born workers understand "people above" and "people below."

A second limitation in the existing scholarship on workers' identities is the partial nature of its empirical grounding. Most of what we know systematically about workers' subjective identities is drawn either from national surveys that by their nature do little probing or from qualitative studies that focus disproportionately on workers in suburban New York and New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, the ethnographic research on New York and New Jersey has been a rich source of theorizing, significantly contributing to disentangling the meaning behind national survey findings. Nonetheless, the preponderance of theorizing based on the experiences of workers in the northeast is a drawback. If Evans and Kelly's reference group theory is correct, then we might expect that when the number and composition of observable reference groups vary, so perhaps might workers' subjective identities. In a nation where the overwhelming majority of people live outside of the suburbs surrounding New York City, if we are to understand better how workers draw boundaries between themselves and others, there is a pressing need to conduct studies of additional states, especially ones like California where the alteration of the racial and ethnic landscape began early and continues today.

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<sup>2</sup> Gorman's (2000) study of cross-class perceptions of social class is a partial exception, as it was carried out in a medium sized Northeastern city.



## Research Design

Like Lamont, our approach to studying workers' identities focuses on "boundary work."<sup>3</sup> In open-ended interviews, Lamont questioned workers about their work, their communities, and their values. Workers were also asked to describe their friends and foes, role models and heroes, and the kinds of people they like and dislike. Additionally, she asked about whom they feel similar to and different from, and superior and inferior to. Lamont coded and compared the criteria of evaluation behind workers' responses. Based on their answers Lamont then inductively developed an understanding of the most salient principles of classification that operate behind workers evaluations of worth and perceptions of social hierarchies. We followed a similar procedure, modifying the questions she used to reflect the presence of immigrants in the workforce and among our target population of interviewees. To assess the salience of class identity we ask a limited number of open-ended questions, but we additionally code how often workers spontaneously introduce or talk about class in the bulk of the interview, compared to other possible dimensions of social identity.

Our sample of interviewees was drawn from immigrant and native-born white workers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Like Lamont, we aimed to tap a wide spectrum of worldviews but unlike Lamont, we did not begin with phone books to construct our sample of interviewees. A close reading of Lamont's data collection strategy reveals that her procedure resulted in a very low response rate (only 20 percent of those she contacted agreed to be interviewed, and of those, only 21percent satisfied her sample criteria). Lamont acknowledges that her low response rate precluded creating "a representative sample by using random sampling" (Lamont 2000, p. 340, n 13), and that she instead sought to tap a broader range of worldviews "than those surveyed in site-specific studies." By 2009 when we began our interviews, using phone directories to locate interviewees was an even less viable strategy because the widespread adoption of cell phones had substantially reduced the number of houses with landlines, and, thus entries in phone directories. (Pollsters term this the "non-coverage bias.") The National Center for Health Statistics estimates that fully one in four households no longer had landline service by the second half of 2009. The figure for Latinos and young adults was even higher: almost on third of Latinos

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<sup>3</sup> Because moral discourse and social context are melded together more firmly than Lamont's interview strategy can make transparent (Fantasia, 2002), our research team is also taking notes on overheard everyday conversations occurring on buses and similar public spaces to compare with the discourses expressed in the interviews. See Swidler and Watkins (2009) for a description of such "conversational journals."

lacked landlines in 2009, as did almost half of young adults between the ages of 25 and 29 (Blumberg and Luke 2010). In addition, contacting potential Latino interviewees cold, based on entries in phone directories, would have been unlikely to garner agreement among immigrant workers who are either themselves undocumented or who might share housing with others who are undocumented.

To overcome these challenges, we took advantage of the diversity of the undergraduate population at UC Berkeley to find some of our initial interviewees. Although Berkeley is a highly selective university, its undergraduates are far more diverse than is the case at most other highly selective colleges and universities. One fifth of entering freshman in 2012 are first-generation college students, one fifth identify as having grown up in lower or working-class homes, and 12% are Latino (Office of Planning and Analysis 2011; UC Berkeley 2012). Furthermore, UC Berkeley enrolls a substantial number of transfer students from California's community college system each year, and the percentage of working-class and Latino students is even higher among such students: 44% of transfer students are first-generation students, 41% categorize their families as lower or working-class, and almost one-fifth are Latino.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the majority of undergraduates are California residents, which means that many working-class and Latino undergraduates have access to networks that include California workers.

Our sampling strategy entailed a combination of approaching workers at their workplaces to request an interview and tapping into the networks of fourteen undergraduate research apprentices, almost all of who were transfer students and the first in their families to go to college. After identifying initial interviewees, we used a chain referral pattern, asking these interviewees for the names of work mates, neighbors, and co-congregants at church with whom we might conduct interviews. Two of our undergraduate apprentices coached soccer teams, and they tapped the working-class parents of kids who they coached as initial network nodes. One student tutored at an Oakland elementary school, and she similarly tapped the Spanish-speaking parents of kids she tutored for interviews.

To be interviewed for this study, individuals must work at least 30 hours a week, have at least five years of work experience, not have a college education, and live in the 9 counties of the San Francisco Bay Area. Interviews typically last approximately 2 hours each. Most of the

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<sup>4</sup> The percentages for first-generation and Latino students are probably even higher for some of the social science departments (including sociology), although comparable figures are unavailable.

interviews conducted to date have been with workers who live in Oakland, San Francisco, or one of the suburban communities located in the counties to the south, east, and north of San Francisco. Unlike Lamont, we have interviewed both male and female workers. The Latino men we have interviewed to date include construction workers, truck drivers, food service workers, a parking attendant, a car mechanic, a laundry worker, and a dental assistant. The Latinas we have interviewed include janitors, housekeepers, and food service workers. Our white male interviewees include construction workers, sales clerks, janitors, a landscaper, a shipping clerk, and a hospital orderly. The white females we have interviewed include construction workers, clerical workers, sales clerks, and a receptionist. Up to now, we have completed 62 interviews, 37 with Latino workers and 25 with white workers. We intend to complete 40 interviews with each group. Although we are still in the process of interviewing workers and studying the lengthy transcripts of those already interviewed, below we present some of our preliminary findings.

### **Education and Self-reliance: what does—and doesn't-- unify the workers we interviewed**

Like us, Lamont interviewed many different types of blue and white-collar workers. She indicates that the commonality uniting her interviewees was the shared experience of struggling, which she ties to their having to overcome the disadvantages of not having a college degree. In contrast, almost all of our white and Latino immigrant workers spoke of being self-reliant, with struggle dominating only some of our interviews. Most of our Latino interviewees also described their lives as a struggle, as did a few of the white workers. But other of our white interviewees seemed to feel fairly at ease in their lives, even as they acknowledged the disadvantages of their positions.

Both white and Latino workers emphasized self-reliance throughout their interviews. Aaron, a white construction inspector said, "it hasn't been handed to me; I've worked for what I have." Nicholas, a white sales clerk, said, "You want something: work for it. That's what I was taught. Bought my own clothes since I was 15." Even Jeremy, a white shoe salesman and one of the few people we talked with who did not consider himself self-reliant, placed primary importance on this trait; he feels unsuccessful "because I can't always sustain myself. Sometimes I have to rely on other people to help me." He was taught "to work for whatever you have, to not try to live off the government or other people or things like that, to sustain yourself, probably

that was the key value." Similarly, Latino immigrants felt proud of themselves for having successfully immigrated to the U.S. and for sustaining themselves while here. Maria, an El Salvadorian cook, feels successful because "I'm a woman and by myself I have battled and brought my children here. I didn't get help from their father or anyone, and I did it only with my work, and my salary." Edgar, an El Salvadorian truck driver says he is "successful because I have a job and I depend on myself." He admits that he is "afraid to get old and not be able to take care of myself." Both white and Latino workers disliked coworkers who did not complete their own work or who looked for constant guidance from others.

Although self-reliance was an important value and source of pride for all interviewees, a key difference between our Latino immigrant and white interviewees that shapes their self-understandings and the way they categorize others is that the great majority of our Latino interviewees did not have the financial resources to obtain a college degree. Indeed, many had to drop out of high school to work in order to help support their families. In contrast, the white interviewees tended to believe that they could have chosen to complete a college degree. Our Latino interviewees, unlike our white interviewees, can clearly point to a lack of opportunities to explain their current income or occupational situation.

As a result, Latinos tend to admire those that take advantage of the opportunities available to them, and seek to provide greater opportunities for their children. Latinos seek to *superarse*, that is, better themselves, given the opportunities available to them. For example, Oscar, a parking attendant, feels successful because he's "always advanced as much as possible in all my jobs." Furthermore, as obtaining a college degree was not possible for them, Latino immigrants can believe that education is the ideal path to success, without feeling guilty for not having taken that path. For our Latino interviewees, education is clearly the path to the "good life." Beyond economic success, education is seen as giving individuals the freedom to pursue their dreams. As the college-education path was not available to them, Latino working class workers, unlike white working class workers, do not have to argue that their path to success is superior, or even equal, to the college-education path in order to maintain their dignity.

In fact, our Latino interviewees do not see their own path as ideal. Given their educational, language, and legal limitations, few of the Latino immigrants believe they will be able to earn a high income or obtain a high prestige job. When asked if one of their goals was to be rich, several interviewees laughed at the question and said it was an unrealistic goal. Instead,

these interviewees find purpose in being self-reliant and in working hard to provide their children with more opportunities than were available to them. Many of the interviewees appear to find dignity in sacrificing themselves for their children. Their self-worth is tied to their children's success, particularly educational success, which, more than income, is seen as the key to expanding opportunities. German, a Mexican truck driver, says that his goals are to "take care of my daughters. Working-wise, get a better job and gain more money and have a better position. My goal is to send my daughters to college." Esferino, a Mexican mechanic, says that "life here is expensive and I want my children to have a better future than me. So, how can I help them? I can help them by working so that they can live more comfortably than me." He is proud of his son who completed a technical career and is working as a dental assistant. He says, "Seeing my son, even though it's a small career it is already different than my work, or seeing my daughter in university, you feel proud. At least you say, 'I did something good in life.'"

Latinos, for the most part, consciously sacrificed their lives in their home countries for the sake of improving their economic situation and providing more opportunities for their children in the U.S. These interviewees believe they are sacrificing themselves in order to provide a better life for their children, or at least sacrificing their social life for economic gain. Further, they do not view their path as ideal or desirable, compared to the college education path. As a result, Latinos appear to be more comfortable criticizing their lives than their white counterparts. Compared to white interviewees, Latinos were more likely to view hard work, and their current occupational status, negatively. In contrast, no white interviewee spoke negatively about hard work. Many Latino interviewees expressed sadness about having to constantly work, and reported that all they did was work, leaving them without time for other activities or even for friendships. Interviewees discussed becoming "accustomed" to, rather than fulfilled in, their work. Several talked about their hopes of finding less physically demanding work. Most are aware that they need to work hard because of their limited opportunities, and hope their children will have the option of having "softer" jobs. They are worried about how they will sustain themselves when they grow older and cannot continue to work in physically demanding jobs. Finally, workers tended to describe life in the U.S. as very stressful, due to the need to be constantly working and their limited access to the safety net or friends with resources. Milton, a dental assistant, hopes to move to a different country after retiring: "Here everything is a routine. You have to be working to pay your bills. That doesn't mean that in other countries you don't

have to do it, but it's like more rushed here, more pressure, and I wouldn't want to live with that pressure when I'm older."

Latino interviewees describe feeling quite isolated from co-workers, friends, and neighbors, and rarely mention hobbies or activities outside of work aside from family life. Many report that they do not have a best friend. The majority of our respondents report they do not have friends either at work or in their neighborhoods. When asked about their neighborhoods, the majority of Latino interviewees respond that they are content in their neighborhoods because they are relatively safe. They do not seem to know their neighbors, or to talk about positive features of their neighborhoods. Often, our Latino interviewees attribute their isolation to their work demands. For example, Silvia, an El Salvadorian janitor, explains that she does not have relationships with her neighbors because, "Here [in the U.S.] people are always working, so there's not much communication. And here one is always locked inside; one doesn't spend time outside. So maybe that's why." Similarly, Ana, an El Salvadorian waitress says that she does not know people in her neighborhood "because I don't have time to know them. I'm always working."

Another reason Latinos may feel isolated is that they tend to be fairly suspicious of others. This may be a result of feeling like their life is a constant struggle, and that any complication can throw off the delicate balance necessary to stay afloat. They seem to believe others are more likely to make their life more difficult than to support them. Further, they often discuss being discriminated against or being treated as inferior. The majority is painfully aware of their low status in U.S. society. Francia, an El Salvadorian janitor, dislikes people that discriminate against her; in particular, she dislikes "people that you speak to them, and they don't speak back to you, or they act like you are beneath them, that feels like discrimination to me." Given their general suspicion of others, our Latino interviewees praise neighbors and co-workers who "don't mess with me" and who are able to minimize conflicts. As Jose, a Mexican construction worker said, "you have to adapt, you can't be too stubborn, and you have to know how to get along." They seem to avoid forming social ties with others in order to prevent future confrontations and believe that it is difficult to find friends in whom they can confide. Esferino, a Mexican mechanic says that at work

There are no friends, just 'how are you?' and that's it. I don't like to talk too much because that's how you can get into problems. Here, there is serious jealousy amongst ourselves [Latinos]. If you know how to do

things and another person is hired and they also know how to do it, it's really tough competition to see who can do it best, and you start to hate each other. Perhaps you think they are going to take your job or pay you less. It's that feeling of inadequacy we carry inside ourselves.

In this comment, Esferino attributes suspicion and jealousy amongst Latino co-workers in the U.S. to intense job competition as well as to the unsatisfied feeling he believes Latino immigrants carry inside themselves, perhaps due to their precarious economic situation or low status in U.S. society. Many Latino immigrants appear to feel insecure in their place in the U.S., and to believe others' are likely to look down upon them and may even cause them damage. Given that they feel so alone, it is unsurprising that they value self-reliance.

Consequently, interviewees enthusiastically praised individuals who were respectful, trust-worthy, or willing to lend a helping hand. Jose, a Mexican construction worker, describes his best friend as somebody who,

I will never forget, because in two or three occasions, when I needed money for rent, he lent it to me. And though I wasn't able to pay him back immediately the first time, he still lent me more money. He understood sometimes things go badly, and he helped me and helped me again, and you say, that's a friend, he's worried about me, has tried to give me advice, to help me, when I've been down he's helped me, he's been a great person to me, and I really value him.

Respect is rarely discussed by Lamont but it is perhaps the most highly valued attribute amongst our Latino interviewees. Oscar, an El Salvadorian parking attendant, teaches his children to "respect his elders, people in general, and poor people." Ruben, a Mexican mechanic and construction worker, believes it is very important to be shown respect at work, and to avoid treating others as if they have nothing to contribute. It is necessary to respect coworkers as individuals who may have their own ideas, and not simply delegate manual labor to them. He is a crew leader, and asks those working under him "what they think, what's the easiest way to do it, or how they think we should do it, and I listen, and if they suggest a good idea, we use it. They have their own experience, which I take into account." For our Latino interviewees, it is very important to be respected and to have their opinions and skills acknowledged.

White interviewees, in contrast, seem to need to articulate a path to the good life that does not depend on a college education. For the most part, they feel that they chose not to obtain a college degree, and they argue that this decision does not prevent them from achieving the good life. Our white interviewees tended to argue that education is good for some people, but is not the right path for them. Matt, a manager at a snowboarding shop, said

My brother turned out to be a teacher, which is cool. But he's totally into school, he went to college, got his masters, is a teacher, and the thing is he doesn't get paid shit but he does it cause he likes it. He's, he's academic. That's the way he is. You gotta find your niche. I'm not academic and I can't see myself going back to school unless it was for a trade or something. Or for some kind of job. There is no way I just want to go get my AA or Bachelor's. It just doesn't sound fulfilling.

Interestingly, in this story, advanced education did not even lead to a higher income. It was simply the right path for his brother to find a fulfilling job, just like Matt is currently trying to find a job that would be fulfilling for him. Similarly, a union plumber said that he was too active and enjoyed the outdoors too much to focus on school. Jules, a heavy equipment operator, told us

I think that education comes in many forms. I don't think that there's just typical college education. I think that there's many ways to be educated. There's street smarts, there's book smart, there's, you know, there's just many ways to be educated.

None of these white workers saw a college education as a good fit for their personalities.

Some of our white interviewees mentioned alcohol or drugs as the reason they had not gone to college. Jules, who left school in 7<sup>th</sup> grade and only later got her GED, talked about inheriting her parent's "addiction values," and told us that when she was growing up, her parents "were getting loaded" and "doing their thing, so they didn't encourage" her education. Significantly, even though her childhood circumstances provided few opportunities to pursue a college path, she interprets her lack of a college education as a "choice."

The white interviewees forge alternate definitions of success that do not depend on a college degree. Instead of achieving success through education, our white interviewees tend to either believe that they will achieve traditional socioeconomic success without a college degree, or to postulate an alternate view of success that does not depend on socioeconomic success. There is an important difference, however, in how the blue-collar workers and the service workers talked about success. The majority of the blue-collar workers believe that they will be able to achieve socioeconomic success due to their skill. They are fulfilled in their work, and see it as valuable and difficult. They value coworkers who were highly skilled and admire strength, courage, responsibility, and hard work. They see themselves as skilled professionals and it is important to them that their talent be respected; they become upset when supervisors prioritize saving money and ask them to cut corners or hurry. They have worked hard to be where they are, and dislike those that try to get ahead without having put in the necessary work. In contrast, the service workers tend to identify with their activities outside of work, such as being a skateboarder or being family-oriented. The service workers that are unable to identify with activities outside of work have a difficult time finding dignity in their lives, and



appear to feel inferior to those earning higher incomes. Service workers are less likely to express pride in their work, often describe their jobs as "easy," and minimize the skills required in their jobs. Only one service worker, Alison, who works at a coffee shop, expresses pride in her work, but even she feels "embarrassed" to admit to enjoying her job as her co-workers constantly complain about it; she assumes they must "have something better to do." The service workers tend to admire those who are good at the activities they identify with outside of work, such as fitness, snowboarding, or being a good mother; more broadly, they often praise individuals that are true to themselves and pursue their passions.

In contrast to Latinos, many white working class workers tend to speak warmly about their neighborhoods and co-workers, and to mention volunteer activities and hobbies.

Jason, the white union plumber shares that he lives in

a cool neighborhood. Everybody hangs out together; we get together on the weekends. We have block parties on Halloween and the Fourth of July. Everybody out barbequing in the front yard. It's really cool... We talk to each other over the fences, joking. We are always out, barbequing. We all have dogs. We watch out for each other. If I go away on vacation my neighbor will ask me "hey do you want me to feed your dog while you are gone?" And I will give him the keys to the fence and he will feed my dog.

In his free time, Jason is quite active: he goes to the gym, attends San Francisco 49ers games, spends time with friends, cooks with his girlfriend, plays baseball, and coaches his girlfriend's son's baseball team. Similarly, Matt, a white sales clerk and manager at a snowboard shop, describes his relationship with his coworkers as "hanging out with your friends." He loves that there are plenty of concerts and a wide diversity of restaurants close to his home. He spends over 50 days a year snowboarding and loves San Francisco because it "is basically a skater park. You can just cruise through it." Josh, a hospital orderly, works extensive hours but also volunteers many hours

with our teen ministry in our church. You know anywhere from like doing bible studies with them ...to helping them believe that ...they are going to do something great. I spend a lot of my own free time just thinking of ways to like help them whether its thinking of the scriptures to give them or just really trying to work out my own personal vision for their life and what they can do. So I serve a lot that way, even though emotionally ...some of the teens I have aren't exactly easy ...to deal with. So it requires me to have a lot in me to give to them so I volunteer with them ...also, you know, driving around ...spending that gas money ...that's not cheap. It's definitely a contribution.

Overall, our white working class interviewees appear to work hard to have fulfilling lives outside of work. They are much less likely to discuss being treated as inferior or to believe that others cannot be trusted. For the most part, they seem to be more secure in their position in the U.S. hierarchy, even though, as we shall see, they are often quite critical of that hierarchy.



## **Class Awareness, Identification, and Boundaries**

All of our interviewees, both Latino immigrant and white workers, believe that class divides the U.S. There are important differences, however, in where they locate themselves among the classes and in the ways in which they connect their own lives with the class divisions they believe to characterize America society. All of our Latino interviewees identified themselves as “lower” or “working class,” while our white interviewees sometimes identified themselves as lower class, sometimes as working class, and sometimes as middle class. Also, like many survey researchers, we found that white interviewees would occasionally change their responses to “working class” from “middle” or “lower” class when reference was made to the category of “working class” in follow-up questions. Moreover, we found some tendency for white interviewees to identify as middle class when their income was imperfectly correlated with their occupation and lack of a college education, providing support for Hout’s (2008) suggestion that ambiguity and ambivalence helps to account for the mismatch between subjective class identity and objective class position.

More informative, however, are the reasons workers offered for the responses they gave. Brooke, a white executive assistant said, “I’m just a grunt, you know what I mean? So... I think I’m in the working class.” Samantha, a 55-year-old white sales clerk, declared that she is in the lower class and went on to explain that that there used to be a difference between the working class and the lower class, but not any more. “I think working class used to be middle class but that’s all changed. And a lot of that is the economy.” Aaron, the white construction inspector, on the other hand categorized himself as middle class, an identity that seemed to be equal parts aspiration and a refusal to feel “oppressed.”

*Aaron: [P]hysically I’m working class, but mentally I’m probably more towards middle class. At least that’s what I aspire to be, that’s the direction that I’m headed in.*

I: What do you see as the main difference between the two?

*Aaron: Mostly material more than anything.*

I: Money?

*Aaron: Not necessarily, money. Stability. Owning a home versus being a renter. Buying a new car when my car breaks instead of buying another used one.*

I: Ok. So, would you define class mostly in economic terms, or...?

*Aaron: No, not entirely. A lot of it is how you view yourself.*

I: What do you think are the differences between how people view themselves in the middle class versus the working class?

*Aaron: I've noticed a lot of the people who would consider themselves working class always feel like they're, not always, but frequently feel like they're oppressed. That they're always struggling and so on whereas people who consider themselves middle class are stable and they feel like they're part of the herd, not fighting to get in.*

Whether our interviewees labeled themselves lower, working, or middle class, they frequently had a harsher critique of “people above” than that of Lamont’s interviewees. The workers with whom Lamont spoke primarily criticized the upper half for lacking straightforwardness or personal integrity while many of the white and Latino workers we interviewed were quite critical of class-hierarchy in America.

White interviewees criticized the upper classes for not playing by the rules: they believe “those above” use problematic shortcuts, connections, and unfair advantages to get ahead. They were skeptical that greater education equipped the upper classes with greater skills. For example, Matt, a manager at a snowboard shop, complains about a former boss who belonged to a fraternity:

*A fraternity in college, a boys club. I will scratch your back and you can scratch mine, that frat attitude. You go to college, you join the right frat and you get the job with \$200,000 yearly salary. You run the world. You have to know somebody to get the right job. That's not for me. The reason why we are in this state is because the Wall Street bankers are all those frat boys. They scratched each other's backs.*

Matt believes it is unjust that his former employer succeeded as a result of his connections as opposed to his hard work or talent, and in particular, that high-level positions are reserved for those that attend certain colleges or join certain organizations. Additionally, he complained that his employer's daughter worked in the shop during the summer and "got to leave work in the middle of the day for as many hours as she liked. It wasn't nice. If I hire my kids in my own shop, I would have them work the same as everybody else. They will get paid the same as everybody else. I might even pay them less." Similarly, Jason, the white union plumber, doesn't like “these people having a big business mindset. I don't understand their mentality.” He says he would have no problem with somebody who goes into a business and works their way up the ladder to become CEO, but is upset by those that simply take over a company, and “come in and break our lives. They are always trying to break the rules, cut the corners. They are trying to cut every corner they can to make more money.” As a result of cutting corners, “you don't get the best product. It's hard to explain. It's not because we cannot produce the top product, it's just that sometimes we are forced not to produce the top quality product.” Jason believes that individuals primarily concerned with making a large profit are endangering his path towards success;

he feels if they simply respected the union rules, they would obtain a high quality product, the union workers would receive a good wage, and "everybody would be happy." Instead, employers that started at the top without having to work their way up are disrupting his way of life.

We see that both Jason and Matt disapprove of the upper half's efforts to get ahead by cutting corners. While our white working class workers believe they follow the rules to get ahead, they see that others (primarily the upper classes, but also Latino immigrants) get ahead by breaking these rules. This leads many of our white interviewees to be skeptical that those at the top really earned their way there as a result of their skill or personal efforts. Further, several workers indicated concern that the upper classes' efforts to get ahead come at the expense of others: for example, Matt believes that by only looking out for themselves ("scratch each other's backs"), the upper class caused the last recession, while Jason believes that by cutting corners in order to earn even more money, his employers are forcing him and his coworkers to create a lower quality product, and are leading to the downgrading of their occupation.

Furthermore, several white workers complained about employers or supervisors who abused their position by treating workers poorly or forcing them to complete unnecessary tasks. As Nicholas, a white sales clerk, said, "Some people are just managers cause they like to tell people what to do." Similarly, Jeremy, a shoe salesman, said he disliked "people who want to control other people. I think people should be left to live their own life, so any dictators, anybody like that, I don't like. Even in a small level, like a person who is a shift manager at McDonald's who really loves the fact that he can boss people around, it's the same thing." He complains about a manager who tells him to "just do what you are told." These workers want their skills, autonomy, and dignity to be respected. We see, then, that some of the white working class interviewees are directly critical of authority.

Finally, a few workers ridiculed individuals that are very well educated, but who appear to be ignorant of the world around them. Julia, a coffee shop manager, feels superior to the:

botoxed, stiletto ladies who have no concept of the real world. Who are like charmed and might have gotten a real education but don't really know anything. I mean, they've got nothing on me. I feel superior. I think people who are exceptionally beautiful or have all the money in the world, there's a lot of them who are like, you know, not with it. Just living in a different world, just in their own little box. I feel they have a disadvantage because people didn't hold them to a very high standard, you know?

These individuals have not had to make their way in the real world, and as a result, appear to our interviewees as silly, ignorant, and even incompetent. Again, here, we see skepticism that either college graduation or a high-prestige job implies that individuals are particularly talented or knowledgeable.

In contrast to the white working class, Latino workers did not focus on the upper class' undeserved wealth or privileged ignorance, and do not portray the upper class as cutting corners to get ahead. This may be the result of Latino interviewees' belief that education confers individuals, often belonging to the upper class, with important and valuable skills. Instead of arguing that the upper classes did not earn their place in the hierarchy, Latino immigrants draw boundaries against the upper class for their greed and exploitative nature. Though Esferino, the Mexican mechanic, likes his job, he hates that:

I work like a slave because it's not my own business. You're working for someone else, who insists that you put in a lot more than is possible to accomplish in eight hours. It makes you feel like a slave. There is constant pressure, now you finished this car, here are three more cars waiting for you, and that's a lot of pressure. I'd like to be calmer, to be able to finish the cars properly, so the client is happy and the boss too. But here [in the U.S.] you can't do that. Here the more you produce, the more your boss earns, though we [the workers] always earn the same.

Esferino believes his employer exploits him and pressures him to extract as much work as possible from him. His employer only cares about financial gain, even if this leads to a rushed job and to a lower quality service. In contrast, Esferino takes pride in the quality of the work itself. Several Latino interviewees suggested that they cared about the quality of the work, while their employer only cared about enriching himself.

Further, Latinos were much more critical of individuals who were solely concerned with financial gain than white interviewees, and of inequality as a whole. Many believe it is greedy and overly ambitious to seek to be rich; a more appropriate goal is to acquire enough resources to support your expenses and to provide opportunities for your children. Almost all Latino immigrant interviewees said they would not want to be rich. These interviewees worry about the corrupting effects of wealth and believe that the rich should take much greater measures to improve the life circumstances of the poor. Hermilia, an El Salvadorian janitor, for example, says, "I do not think I would be a good person" if she were rich. She believes "Money changes a person. If I had it, well, everybody says they would help those that need it most, and I think I would do the same, but who knows? If I had it, I would probably forget about them." She argues that those with power "all steal. They are all worried about what is best for them and do not care about anything else. They are in power and they will look out for themselves and their well being. There are so many poor people and they are supposedly going to help them, but that help never comes." Similarly, Juan, a Mexican construction worker, argues "there are many people dying of hunger and [the rich] are just worried about their own interest and nothing else.

There is a great imbalance, and I think everything should be a bit fairer. I don't think there should be so much poverty; there shouldn't be people with so many possessions and riches and so many people dying of hunger." Maria, the El Salvadorian janitor and housekeeper, dislikes that "there are some people that if they have something, they don't want others to have it. It's selfish. They want more than others, and I don't like that."

In many ways, these sentiments are similar to those of our white working class interviewees. Both groups of working class workers believe that the rich only look out for themselves and do not worry about the consequences of their actions on those below them. This criticism of the upper class may seem contradictory to the emphasis of both white and Latino working class workers on the importance of contributing to the US economy, discussed below. It seems that, regardless of their own views about the value of paying workers as little as possible and of the problems of exploitative employers, both white and Latino working class interviewees believe that in the US contributing to the economy is a widespread value, and can serve as a tool to argue for or against the worth of particular individuals. Thus, though Esferino dislikes having to work like a "slave," he believes that in the US you simply cannot choose to create a "calmer" workplace at the expense of productivity. As such, he can both complain about being treated like a slave but argue that he deserves legal status in the US due to his contributions to the US economy. Furthermore, while there is some overlap between this criticism of the upper class and Lamont's African-American workers use of notions of collectivism to describe "those above" as exploitative and egotistical, this was a minority opinion among her interviewees, and the great majority of her African-American working class workers did not draw moral boundaries against the upper class.

Furthermore, compared to both Lamont's black and white working class workers, and our white interviewees, Latinos were the only group to explicitly discuss egalitarianism. Latinos discussed their disapproval of inequality often and unprompted. They believed it was unfair for the rich to be so rich while there were so many poor people, and they explicitly disapproved of the desire to be rich. Instead, our white interviewees only criticized inequality if they thought it was a result of one group directly benefitting at the expense of another group. Interestingly, Lamont's African-American workers were even more likely than her white interviewees to place a high value on money and becoming rich.

Finally, Latinos extended the criticism of the greed of the upper class to focus specifically on the upper class' responsibility to the poor, which they take as undisputable. As we can see from Hermilia's quote above, even the so-called non-caring rich and powerful outwardly profess

that they will help the poor; the complaint is that they fail to deliver on their promises, not that they do not agree that they should be helping the poor. She cannot imagine a world where the rich simply explicitly deny their obligation to help the poor. Indeed, the great majority of our Latino interviewees expressed solidarity for the poor, while our white interviewees rarely discussed the poor. Latino interviewees were much more likely than our white interviewees to state they would help the poor if they ever became rich. In large part, this concern towards the poor appears to be a result of Latino immigrants' belief that they are in low-status jobs as a result of their immigrant status, limited English, and low educational levels; not as a result of being lazy or lacking ambition. Indeed, while our white interviewees did not tend to see themselves as poor, Latino interviewees often saw themselves as occupying that category. They were very aware that they did not have the same opportunities to succeed in the US as other groups. It seems very possible to them to be a hard-worker and remain poor, or partially employed. As we saw with the boundaries they drew against the white working class, Latino immigrants' value hard work and dislike those that do not take advantage of the opportunities available to them.

Thus, Latinos' solidarity towards the poor is very circumscribed: Latino interviewees were particularly likely to empathize with those who they believed could not be blamed for their difficult situation, such as children, newly arrived immigrants, the disabled, and the elderly. As Esferino, the Mexican car mechanic said, "In Mexico, there's many children with terminal illnesses, and they are the ones that need help. I'm healthy. I can work and earn money. But there are children who starting at one or two years of age are already sick or seniors who suffered bad luck and find themselves very ill. It's very difficult to suffer in the hospital. I wouldn't give money to a young man who is asking for money on the street. I wouldn't help him." Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, our Latino interviewees drew strong boundaries against those that relied on governmental assistance. These individuals were disliked because they were seen as lazy and as wasting the opportunities available to them. Maria's goal in life is to see her daughters "be successful, that's my priority, it's like I say to my daughter, 'I'm going to sacrifice to give you everything you need,' that's my first goal, that my daughters become somebody in life and don't become parasites of society, relying on the government." Individuals who relied on governmental assistance were usually seen as having more opportunities than our Latino interviewees, due to legal status and English ability. It seemed unfair to our interviewees that they work hard and



managed to support themselves despite their numerous disadvantages, while others with more opportunities available to them avoid work.

For the most part, our white interviewees were unconcerned about the poor. Only a few interviewees expressed sympathy with the plight of the poor, or negative sentiments towards the poor. Further, a few white workers differentiated themselves from the poor by emphasizing their ability to pay their bills, take care of their families, and occasionally treat their friends to meals or gifts; this seemed to provide them with some comfort. Those expressing sympathy believed that they could easily have ended up poor, and that they were lucky to have found a job that offered a living wage. Criticism of the poor tends to center on the homeless, as having “given up” or on those that receive governmental assistance. Jason became upset when discussing cash assistance:

I think welfare in this country needs to be fixed. I think it's crazy. I have to get up every morning and get to work by 6:30. I have to fight the traffic and work eight hours per day. But this guy who works in a Taco Bell and he has this girlfriend and they have six kids. They are all on the welfare. It is not okay for him to live in the same house as mine. It is not fair. I bust my ass off every day to earn a good living. No, that is not fair. It does not make any sense. I work hard every day and why am I getting the same pay check as he does? The government treats people differently. It should be equal. The government should treat everybody equal.

He believes governmental assistance provides irresponsible individuals who have children they cannot afford with an unfair advantage over individuals who are responsible and willing to work hard. This is quite similar to his complaint that the upper class cut corners to achieve their high-wages, though those that receive government assistance do not have the power to hinder his employment opportunities. Mike, a union carpenter, dislikes homeless people because they are "weak, they give up. They are just pissing in the streets, not trying to do anything, and they are a nuisance to me." Like Lamont's workers who emphasize perseverance above most qualities, Mike believes giving up is unjustifiable. Nevertheless, compared to Lamont's interviewees, individuals that relied on government assistance appeared to be less salient for our working class interviewees, particularly for the white workers.

### **Racial boundaries**

Unlike for Lamont's white working-class interviewees (2000: 59), Latinos rather than African-Americans are the most salient group for our white working-class interviewees. Many of the white working class interviewees, particularly blue-collar workers, see Latino immigrants as a threat to their livelihood due to their willingness to accept low wages and poor working conditions. Furthermore, the presence of presumably unskilled Latino workers engaged in the same occupations as our blue-collar interviewees threatens these workers' perceptions of

themselves as skilled workers. For example, Joe, a white union carpenter, argues that immigrants "are going to work for a lot less money, longer hours, and in worse conditions. By doing that they are taking jobs away from us." He stated that whenever his coworkers see that there's "a group on the worksite who are probably illegal, we discuss it. The guys are upset about it."

Nevertheless, white working-class workers, even blue-collar union workers, were reticent to directly criticize Latino immigrants for failing to consider how their actions affect other workers – that is, for their weak worker solidarity. Mike, a white union carpenter, believes that Latino immigrants are contributing to the downgrading of his occupation, but does not blame them for it:

[Latino immigrants] are coming into the construction industry and breaking the union down, but, they are hungry right now and a hungry person will do a lot of things, and I can't blame them. I see immigrant workers more as a desperation, they will take the worst jobs, put up with a lot more, because they are desperate. It is not their fault, or my fault, it is just how it is. They were born in Mexico or wherever they were born at and they come here and they have to make their way, and I suppose I would be doing the same thing if I were born there, whatever I had to do to make it, I'd do it. I feel like it is not the immigrants' fault. It's not their fault.

It appears that in the U.S., it is difficult to draw boundaries against workers for weak worker solidarity, particularly given the importance placed on hard work and self-reliance. Indeed, no white interviewee expressed uniformly critical views about Latino immigrants, and overwhelmingly they discussed their admiration for Latinos' work ethic. In contrast, Lamont's white interviewees did not express any positive views about African-Americans; even Lamont's white anti-racist interviewees relied on arguments about the universality of human nature or earning capacity, as opposed to arguments about the positive traits they associate with African Americans, to argue for the equality of whites and blacks (2000: 68-69).

Instead of drawing boundaries against Latino immigrants for their weak worker solidarity, then, our white interviewees preferred to criticize other qualities, such as Latinos' illegal border crossing and use of fake documents, as well as their failure to contribute to the U.S. economy by not paying taxes or by sending their money abroad. Christine, a white camp caretaker, was upset that Latino immigrants obtain work in the U.S. after arriving here illegally: "They hired the coyote, got across the border, and got a job. How is that legal? You know? It makes me feel tense that they get jobs." Further, Jason, a white union plumber, worried that Latino immigrants' put him at risk on the job:

There's something that makes me really nervous. When I am working at a refinery, they take extra safety measures. Because it is dangerous. But there are people who don't speak English there. That's a problem. If there is an emergency, it's going to be a big problem. We have to take safety classes and pass the test. But I see the people who don't speak English saying I can't read this, and somebody else will fill the test for them. It's not right. I don't know if they are citizens or not. I get really nervous. They put themselves at risk, and they put me at risk.

Jason believes Latino immigrants do not have the preparation necessary to complete their work safely, yet manage to bypass safety regulations; as a result, they endanger others. Further, he is upset that immigrants live in the U.S. but send their money back to Mexico: "If you are going to be here, working, having a job here, then spend money here. That's what gets our economy going." Similarly, Shelly, a white administrative worker, argued that whites critical of Latino immigrants were not racist, just "informed about how the economy is being drained. I don't think they go in the racist category, they just don't want foreigners coming in and not going through the correct process to become a citizen, and working and not paying taxes like the rest of us." We see that these workers draw boundaries against Latino immigrants for their limited contribution to the U.S. economy – due to failing to pay taxes or spend their money outside the U.S. – or for failing to follow rules, particularly around immigration, but also in areas such as safety at work. These workers tend to believe that while they have followed the appropriate rules to get ahead in the U.S., Latino immigrants instead break the rules to get ahead.

Similarly, whites are the most salient group for the Latino immigrant interviewees. The terms "whites" and "Americans" are used interchangeably, and features of U.S. society that our interviewees support or criticize are attributed to whites. Whites are often perceived as capable, disciplined, orderly, and rule abiding. For example, David, a Peruvian customer service representative, praised his white neighbors because they value "order, cleanliness, and respect laws and traffic. That's what I like about the area: that the [white] Americans try to maintain it." Yet, even as they compliment white workers, Latino interviewees were quick to add that these positive traits of whites do not make them superior to Latinos. The Latino immigrants we interviewed were very aware of their low status in U.S. society, and believed that many whites looked down upon them. Several Latino interviewees complained that whites acted superior to them, were arrogant, and did not respect their abilities. Regarding white individuals, Pablo, a Mexican construction worker says:

What I don't like about them is that they take a lot of advantage of Latino workers. And you know they always think they are the only ones, like I was telling you, they make you feel like you aren't smart, and that they are the only intelligent ones, and I feel it's not like this. They have a huge ego, they've always felt capable, and they earned it because they've made this great country, but they shouldn't deny that there are

other capable people, Latinos and others too. We're capable too; we just need opportunities to show it. They shouldn't think that just because we don't speak the language well we aren't just as capable as them.

Latino immigrants argue that whites that act superior to them need to realize that Latinos' current situation is a consequence of their limited opportunities, instead of their limited competence or skill.

Indeed, our Latino immigrant interviewees often argue that they are not inferior to whites; furthermore, they believe that with regards to interpersonal relationships and treatment of others, they may be superior. Like Lamont's African-American interviewees, Latinos draw boundaries against whites for lacking kindness, warmth, and generosity (2000: 68). For example, Jose, a Mexican painter, shared that Latinos are more "open with people" while Americans are "colder with people. They are indifferent towards others. Also, if a person needs help it is very likely that they would not give them help." Several Latino immigrants thought it was strange that whites did not take care of their elderly parents, and pressured their children to leave their house once they turned eighteen years old. Maria, an El Salvadorian janitor and housekeeper, said that in contrast to Latinos, "when their children reach adulthood, some [white] Americans, well, I'm not sure if they're all like this, but when they reach adulthood, parents don't let their children live in their house, they tell them to become independent, go off on their own, and instead we Latinos always want to have our children with us, they can be 25 years old and we want them with us."

Additionally, several Latino interviewees criticize whites for wasting their many opportunities, their weak work ethic, and for relying on the government or others. For example, Marta, a Peruvian housekeeper knows:

A lot of people who have social security [numbers], they are all Americans, they have the privilege and everything, but they don't use that. They like to be homeless or get support from the government. For me, I don't understand really, why these people are lazy. It's not my fault [employers] don't like working with Americans, they feel more comfortable with Latinos because they work hard. I know people, Americans, that have social security [numbers], that are healthy, but they live off the government. I don't like that situation. I can't live comfortable like that. For me it's easy, my husband is working, and I can stay and sleep in my bed all day long, I have a place to sleep, food, but it's not like that, I have to do something for myself, my own thing.

Several Latino workers deploy market rationale to place Latinos above whites, based on Latinos' work ethic. They argue that employers "want to conserve the most efficient workers" and that Latinos "come to work 100% and are seen as more efficient compared to white people who do not try." Unlike the market arguments espoused by Lamont's white and black working-class workers (2000:68-69), this is not an argument about earnings or consumption. Instead, Latinos

argue that the U.S. is successful in the world because it is a productive economy; in order to preserve this productive economy, employers have to hire the hardest-working employees, which happen to be Latinos. If whites just worked harder, Latinos would not be able to take their jobs.

Juan, a Mexican construction worker, argues that:

In this country you have to produce. If you aren't productive, your company is going to be losing money and you'll be fired. If I start a job at the same time as an American, and I work hard, I make money for my company, everything is going well with me, when time comes for a layoff, who are they going to layoff first? The American, right? Because he's lazy.

Interestingly, Esferino, a Mexican mechanic, extends this market logic to argue that undocumented immigrants deserved legal recognition in the U.S. based on their contributions to the U.S. economy:

What little we make, it stays here. So, if we are working and the money we make stays here, why can't they help us by providing us with legal documents that will allow us to drive, buy an airplane ticket, enter government agencies? Since we are leaving our money and our work here, why can't they help us in this way?

By emphasizing Americans' reliance on governmental assistance and weak work ethic, Latinos suggest that they are contribution more than whites to the U.S. economy; in this manner, they place themselves above whites. Interestingly, Latinos, whites critical of Latinos, and whites supportive of Latinos, all used Latinos' contribution (or lack thereof) to the U.S. economy to argue that they do (or do not) deserve membership in the U.S. Interviewees appear to believe this is a valid criteria of membership, or at least that it is recognized as valid in the U.S.

Finally, several of our working-class interviewees espoused a multicultural ethic; many white interviewees prided themselves on their anti-racism. This stands in sharp contrast to Lamont's working class interviewees, who did not draw strong boundaries against racists or espouse a multicultural ethic. For white working class workers, being anti-racist and valuing multiculturalism served as a status marker; they drew strong boundaries against racist whites, who they portrayed as ignorant. Matt, a snowboard shop manager, shared that:

When I was living in a small town, some people might react when a black guy shows up at the party. I was like "What, did your mom tell you to watch out for a black guy? Come on!" When I was in kindergarten, I spent two hours a day after kindergarten with this lady from Thailand who had a local childcare center. So I had rice as my snack even before I knew the taste of peanut butter and jelly.

Matt ridicules what he considers to be the small-minded racism in his hometown. He describes himself as a well-rounded person who learned very early on to appreciate the benefits of being exposed to different cultures. He prefers the Bay Area to his hometown because of its diversity:

I feel more comfortable here than in my hometown. I like the diversity. People are more tolerant of each other. They are not being judgmental. And, also there is diversity in food. You can get Italian one night and the other day you can get Korean, next day you can get sushi.

Jules, a white construction worker, complained in similar terms about her coworkers' racism. She attributes this behavior to their being:

Afraid of the world so they categorize people, you know, I just don't [do that]. You know, I hear white boys, I see hardhat stickers that say shit like 'Speak English', and occasionally I'll pin someone down and say 'what do you mean "Speak English"? What fucking boat did your grandma and grandpa come off of? You know, like what makes you think that you've got any more entitlements to be here than someone that's coming from Mexico?

In contrast, a few Latino immigrants used the notion of multiculturalism to argue that their own culture was worthy of respect: by discussing the value of diversity and the importance of granting all cultures respect, they hoped that they could persuade others to accept and respect their own culture. For example, Elsa, a Peruvian nanny, said she liked the diversity of her neighborhood, and found it "really interesting to learn about other people, about other cultures, and how they raise their children in different ways. The Chinese, for example, raise their children very differently than Indians. I think that's interesting. I also want others to respect and accept us." Here we see that her appreciation of other cultures is linked to the hope and expectations that other individuals will accept and respect her culture.

## **Conclusion**

We are still in the process of analyzing our interview transcripts and we plan additional interviews. Nevertheless, some important, if tentative, conclusions stand out from the preliminary findings examined in this paper.

Our interviews reveal that white workers' mental maps may be changing along with the nation's racial and ethnic landscape. When Michèle Lamont interviewed white workers twenty years ago, she found that they were relatively unconcerned about immigrants but drew clear moral distinctions between themselves and African Americans. This stands in sharp contrast to the workers we interviewed. The white workers with whom we spoke brought up Latinos much more frequently than African-Americans, and they expanded at far greater length on their views about immigrant workers than they ever talked about (or obliquely referred to) African Americans. Moreover, this is true of workers we interviewed across the Bay Area, even though some of the whites we interviewed lived in counties and cities where African

Americans remain a sizable minority population. (We plan to pursue this line of comparison as our research goes forward).

Moreover, although immigrants are the most salient comparative group for our white interviewees, the boundaries white workers draw between themselves and immigrants are blurrier than the racial boundaries drawn by white workers in Lamont's study. While many of our white interviewees—and especially those in unionized trades—see Latino immigrant workers as a threat to their jobs, they find it dauntingly difficult to come up with a language with which to disparage immigrants, as they admire Latinos' work ethic and strong commitment to self reliance. Ultimately, such traits are the very ones upon which our white interviewees construct their own sense of dignity and self-worth.

Poignantly, while our Latino interviewees are proud of their self-reliance and work ethic, they decry the circumstances that necessitate them working so hard for their livelihoods. Latinos make distinctions between themselves and white workers (often using “whites” and “Americans” as synonyms), and although they frequently perceive of whites in positive terms (capable, disciplined, orderly), they also see them as lacking in kindness, warmth, and generosity. This, of course, echoes critiques made in Lamont's interviews with African American workers, although our Latino interviewees sometimes additionally criticize white workers for wasting opportunities and having less of a work ethic than Latinos.

Importantly, our interviewees' construction of class boundaries also differs in significant ways from those uncovered two decades ago in Lamont's research. Both our white and Latino interviewees draw sharper boundaries against the upper half than Lamont's interviewees; those we talked to often vilify the wealthy for their lack of generosity, for cutting corners to get ahead, for mistreating others, and for ignoring the negative effects of their actions-- not just on individual workers but also on the larger economy. Additionally, our white interviewees mention the poor only infrequently whereas Lamont's white interviewees often constructed rigid boundaries against “those below.” And our Latino interviewees repeatedly express great sympathy for the worthy poor, imagining them to be very like themselves, working hard but facing only limited options. In short, the workers we spoke with are much more critical of “those above” than “those below,” a startling reversal of what Lamont found.

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