Racialized Social Class Work:

Making Sense of Inequality in South Africa During the COVID-19 Lockdown

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This article is dedicated to the South Africans who have been hit the hardest by the COVID-19 lockdowns. While making a living for you was hard prior to the lockdown, for many of you it's now become a fight for survival, as day labor jobs have dried up. Thank you for your willingness to share your stories with us. *Sawubona* – "we see you."

Abstract

COVID-19 lockdowns are happening in almost all societies across the globe, but in South Africa the lockdown is occurring in one of the most unequal societies in the world and in the socio-historic racial context of post-apartheid. Using this extreme context, we ask what the effects of the lockdown are on how people do class work, that is, make sense of and enact their privilege and inequality. Through interviews with diverse participants and using thematic analysis, we explored two main research questions: 1) Is the lockdown a social class shock event prompting class work, and 2) does the class work prompted by the lockdown intersect with race such that class work takes different forms based on the race of the actor? We highlight the ways in which findings from our South African context may generalize to Africa and beyond, and end with practical suggestions for organizations, to continue the perspective taking begun by pandemic lockdowns.

Keywords: diversity, race, social class, privilege

This is the tale of two pandemics, with very unequal sacrifice.
- Chuck Collins, Institute for Policy Studies (Collins et al., 2020).

South Africa conjures thoughts of our apartheid past, but also of Nelson Mandela and the possibility of social equality in our "rainbow nation" (Fairbanks, 2012). The reality of South Africa today, like many nations around the globe, is a widening bimodal economy. South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world (World Bank, 2018a), and this economic inequality is, quite simply, race aligned (Lehohla, 2017): On average, white employees earn approximately three times the salary of Blacks (Francis & Massie, 2018).

Enter the lockdown for the COVID-19 pandemic, with the first South African infection reported on March 5, 2020. By the end of April, the South African National Treasury projected job losses ranging between three and seven million (in a population of 57 million), with the worst case being unemployment above 50% (Omarjee, 2020). But, as our opening quote states, this is a tale of two pandemics. Fifteen percent of South Africans live in informal dwellings (Statistics South Africa, 2019) commonly called "shacks," without running water nor the possibility of social distancing from neighbors. But at the top of the income distribution, 37% of homes have live-in domestic workers' quarters and 45% have swimming pools (BusinessTech, 2017). Sheltering in place is a very different experience based on social class.

Across the world, lockdowns have not only been a different experience based on income, but the pandemic has contributed to a widening of income inequality. In South Africa, at least 20% of employed individuals work in the informal labor market as maids, gardeners, and day laborers (Statistics South Africa, 2020), where no work means no pay. And the lockdown has meant just that—no work, hunger, and desperation. Yet, for more privileged South Africans, an April 2020 study found that about half of the country reported the lockdown would have no effect on their ability to pay bills, earn income, and feed their families (South African Human Sciences Research Council, 2020). So what does this mean

for how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected how we think about ourselves and others, at work and beyond, across the social class divide? How are we making sense of this inequality? In this qualitative study we interview workers across the social class and race spectrum in South Africa, as an extreme context of income and historic race inequality. We ask first whether national lockdowns equate to social class "shock events," that is macro-level phenomena that promote micro-level cognitive processing. Second, we explore how the pandemic may prompt individuals' "class work" (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013), where social class may intersect with race to influence cross-class cognition.

Background

Social Class

We adopt psychological and economic perspectives on social class. Psychologically social class is part of the self, "rooted in objective material resources via income, education and occupational prestige" (Côté, 2011, p. 47), which involves ranking of self and others in order of power, importance, and value. Social class identity is based on many factors such as wealth and income, property ownership, family and heritage, occupational prestige, material possessions, race, and education (Scott, 2005). Due to the legacy of apartheid, the social construction of class in South Africa is largely a story of two races, in lifestyle and consumption patterns. For this reason we take an intersectional approach to our interrogation of the pandemic as a site for social class work—race and social class as interlocked, interactive oppression and privilege where lived experiences can inform academic understanding (Cho et al., 2013). We proceed by referring to social class in terms of lower/middle class versus upper class[1]. We grouped the lower and middle classes together because the transient poor and vulnerable middle classes in South Africa are considered "two

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[1] The term *middle class* originated in Western, developed countries and does not apply well to South African society. Due to our economic polarization, South Africa lacks a "homogenous, cohesive middle group" (Burger & McAravey, 2014, p. 2). Reliance on consumer credit facilitates a middle class lifestyle for many in danger of slipping into poverty (Hurwitz & Luiz, 2007).

sides of the same coin" (Schotte et al., 2018, p. 95) in terms of household composition (i.e., multi-generational), household structure, and income sources. And, a large share of those in the middle-income bracket live in poverty (Visagie & Posel, 2013).

Theory and Research Questions

Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) theorized that people do "class work" when interacting with persons from other social classes in interpersonal encounters within organizations, making social class comparisons between themselves and others. They define class work as "interpretive processes and interaction rituals that organizational members individually and collectively take to manage cross-class encounters (i.e., when members of different classes interact and class becomes salient)" (p. 671). Interacting with members of different classes within one's organization can generate feelings of guilt, for example when one realizes one's privilege (upper social class interacting with lower classes), or shame or embarrassment from comparisons resulting in inadequacy (lower classes interacting with upper class). Cross-class encounters provoke anxiety for one or both parties as they contain conscious or subconscious identity threats (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). These threats prompt cognitive (intrapersonal) class work to feel better about one's self and restore equilibrium. This may take on various forms of *cognitive distancing* to either minimize or normalize class differences, in order to quell anxiety or to prevent such anxiety from occurring in the first place (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). In this paper we position class work as cognitions alleviating one's own emotional reaction or impending emotional reaction when considering other class members.

Important to this study, Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) emphasize that while class work makes persons feel better about cross-class encounters, it also reinforces class structures inherent to inequality. The form of class work an individual takes on is dependent on his or her social class, with the various forms all contributing to maintaining the status quo. For

example, members of the upper class may engage in "declassing" by dismissing one's own privilege ("I'm not that rich. I only have…."- Stuber, 2010, p. 134) and thereby minimizing the discomfort involved in such encounters (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). In contrast, lower classes may see their stigma as a threat and, in response, will engage in class work that denigrates upper classes as somehow "just lucky" to be in their respective circumstances (p. 682 and Skeggs, 2010), or they will try to eschew their lower classhood and "pass" as higher class. Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) theorizing also suggests members of the lower class may *embrace the myth of meritocracy*, whereby they believe, since others like them have transitioned to a higher social class, sufficient effort may allow them to transition too. Also of relevance to the study of social class in South Africa is the argument that those individuals who have recently transitioned into a higher class are fearful of losing their new position, i.e., fearful of losing a job that raised them above lower class and its associated advantages (p. 680). The result is that recent transitioners engage in strategies to distance themselves from the stigmatized, lower classes.

While Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) initial work was focused solely on social class and not race, they called for more intersectional approaches to class work, noting that race and class are sometimes indistinguishable experiences. And their later work (e.g., Gray et al., 2018) has become intersectional—racializing class, as we do here. Beyond their theorizing, we are interested in not just cross-class and -race encounters within the walls of organizations. We propose that individuals are engaging in extra-organizational sense-making about class and race across society, prompted by what we are calling a social class shock event. In regard to employment, the COVID-19 pandemic and inherent lockdown function as a shock event highly salient to workplace relations and attitudes due to forced working from home as well as staggering job losses worldwide. In South Africa but also

elsewhere (e.g., Pilkington, 2020), privilege and social class are tightly bound with race in determining job and health outcomes during the pandemic.

As Blustein et al. (2020) relate, scholars must "acknowledge how the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated existing inequities in the labor market" (online edition). From a psychological vantage point, inequality affects employee attitudes and behaviors (see Bapuji et al., 2020 for a review), and to address inequality made salient by the COVID-19 lockdowns, we take a micro-sociological approach. Macro phenomena can be the site of interrogation of micro-level attitudes, perceptions, and social relations. Our inquiry is congruent with social science research on disasters such as Hurricane Katrina and the Ebola outbreaks in West Africa (Pruyt et al., 2015)—the idea that extreme events such as natural disasters and pandemics are unique and powerful, potentially magnifying social inequalities (Valji, 2020). We ask what the effects of the lockdown are on entrenched pillars of privilege and inequality. Is this a moment for individuals to consider the plight of persons different from themselves and, in so doing, make sense of who they themselves are? Have television news reports and social media posts about the pandemic evoked cross-class thoughts and judgments about its effects on individuals? This leads to our first research question: *Are national lockdowns class salient events evoking "class work?"*

As Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) note, social class is "always being made and remade within different contexts…and through racial and gendered boundaries that are created and enforced by…social institutions" (Weis, 2008, p. 62). Instead of the common, rather simplistic research approach of treating class and race as orthogonal categories (Affolter, 2014), scholars are now, more akin to people's lived experiences, investigating the effects of the intersection of race and class (e.g., Rodriguez et al., 2016). Intersectionality theory acknowledges that for racial and ethnic groups who experience less privilege because of their race or ethnicity, their discrimination is confounded with class such that social class

advancement does not always bring with it increased opportunities and status (Holvino, 2010). As an example, even when black and Latino college students in the United States come from the middle or upper social classes, they are often still perceived and treated as members of the lower class (Gray et al., 2018). This suggests class work is not race neutral but may take on different forms based on racial group membership. And based on the arguments above about pandemics being sites for the magnification of social behavior, and the Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) model of cross-class encounters prompting class work, our aim was to understand how COVID-19 lockdowns trigger racialized class work for individuals. Hence our second research question: *How does class work intersect with race in making sense of inequality and privilege during the lockdown? Are there differences in how different racial groups do class work?*

Method

The South African Lockdown

A nationwide COVID-19 lockdown was announced in South Africa on March 23, 2020 (Ramaphosa, 2020), and it has been described as one of the world's strictest (Magome, 2020), with borders closed to all travel and all shops and businesses required to close except for designated "essential services." Tight restrictions on what items could be purchased included a ban on the sale and movement of tobacco products and alcohol. These restrictions were opposed by higher and lower social classes but for very different reasons: Higher classes were upset at the banning of outdoor exercise and dog walking (Stoddard, 2020), whereas lower classes working in physical labor and customer service jobs (jobs not able to be performed from home) were devastated when their jobs went away (e.g., Smit, 2020). Aftereffects included 55% of informal settlement dwellers reporting having no money for food as of May 31 (Hosken, 2020).

Sample

Social media (our own Facebook page requests) and word-of-mouth were used to recruit study participants whose work lives had been altered in some way due to the COVID-19 lockdown. We drew a sample designed to reflect social class and race attributes of the working population of South Africa (Robinson, 2014). In terms of race, South Africa's labor force is 79.1% Black, 9.7% Coloured,[2] 2.6% Indian/Asian, and 8.7% White (Statistics South Africa, 2020), and the socio-economic class distribution is 42% chronic poor, 11.4% transient poor, 19.4% vulnerable middle class, 22.4% stable middle class, and 4.9% elite (Statistics South Africa, 2019).[3] 21 participants were recruited and interviewed. See Table 1. In being 81.0% Black, 9.5% Coloured, and 9.5% White, our sample approximated South Africa's labor force quite well. Our sample also well represented the combined middle class (42%), though the upper-class elite was over-represented (29%) and the lower class was under-represented (29%), based on self-reported income. Because lower class participants were struggling financially, as a thank-you, we provided them with R 200 (approximately $12 USD) in grocery gift cards. Middle- and upper-class participants received a verbal thank-you.

Procedure and Analysis

We developed our research questions and interview protocol for participants of lower/middle and upper social classes, respectively, by 1) starting from Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) class work model and our knowledge of the South African context, and 2) considering how other researchers have approached qualitative inquiries into social class

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[2] The Coloured population in South Africa consists of people of mixed descent. They are descended from indigenous KhoiKhoi and San people as well as mixed European (white) and African (black) or Asian ancestry. (Booysen & Nkomo, 2010). In our analysis, we grouped Coloured respondents with black respondents, in line with South Africa's Employment Equity Act of 1998 which recognizes both were discriminated against under apartheid. Specifically, the act defines "black people" as "a generic term meaning Black Africans, Coloureds, and Indians" (Employment Equity Act No. 55 of 1998).

[3] The "chronic poor" refers to people who live below the national poverty line and are unlikely to get out of poverty, while the "transient poor" are those living below the national poverty line but with above-average chances of moving out of poverty. The "vulnerable middle class" are those whose basic needs are currently met but who have above-average risks of falling into poverty, while the "stable middle class" can maintain a non-poor standard of living even if faced with a negative shock. Finally, the "elite" have a standard of living far above the average. See Schotte et al. (2018) for a poverty dynamics approach to social stratification.

perceptions (e.g., Kallschmidt & Eaton, 2019). All interviews were conducted in English. A first set was conducted from April 27 to May 2, 2020, during days 32 to 37 of the government lockdown. After identifying an initial set of themes relevant to our research questions, we conducted a second set of interviews with another group of unique participants from May 30 to June 13 (days 65 to 79 of the lockdown), to ensure our initially identified themes were pervasive and we fully understood the meanings. We used the same interview protocols but probed further when participants touched on identified themes (Hennick et al., 2017). Interview protocols appear in the Appendix. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted by one of the three authors, for between 30 and 60 minutes each. Interviews were conducted telephonically, recorded, and then either self-transcribed or electronically transcribed using Otter.ai freeware version 2.0.3.

Interview data were analyzed via the six-stage process of thematic analysis: 1) data familiarization, 2) initial code generation, 3) themes search, 4) themes review, 5) theme definition and naming, and 6) report production (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After conducting the first set of interviews, we used a combination of abductive and inductive methods in our coding by first identifying possible themes from Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013)'s social class work model and our knowledge of the South African context. All authors independently coded and identified possible themes through detailed review of the interview transcripts (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Then we engaged in peer debriefing, discussing initial interpretations with a distinguished race and diversity scholar mentor, and discarding themes not central to our two research questions. At this point we collected the second set of interviews and focused on reaching the point where we understood the issues and no further dimensions or insights were revealed related to our *a priori* research questions (Hennick et al., 2017). Finally, we discussed our reflexivity to identify potential influences extraneous to the phenomena under investigation (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004), recognizing our own

privilege as doctoral student and PhD scholars writing about the pandemic from the safety of our own homes and the security of our jobs (Blustein et al., 2020).

We calculated the inter-rater reliability of our coding by following a secondary coding process utilizing three doctoral students who were trained qualitative researchers but blind to the purpose of the study. We provided to the students all themes and subthemes as well as their illustrative quotations we had identified from the transcripts. They were asked to indicate which theme best fit each quotation, to determine whether "the emergent categories fit the data" (Kreiner et al., 2009, p. 710). The overall percentage of agreement between the coders was .71, meeting the standard .70 threshold (Cohen, 1960).

Results[4]

The Lockdown as a Social Class Shock Event

As Thabang (lower/mid, black) relates, South Africa is a place where there is a normalized, that is, taken-for-granted, bimodal social class system.

"I wait for the day or to see the upper class trying to help lower-class people. They benefit from a system structured like that. An economy and a society that has a hierarchy. With those at the top and those at the bottom. It has been like that for a long time. No one wants to disturb that kind of system."

However, regarding our first research question, we found evidence of the lockdown as a punctuating, material event evoking social class. Alice (upper, black) shares that she regularly sees evidence of poverty in South Africa and perhaps has become a bit immune to it. But the pandemic has made her stop to think and emote about those less fortunate.

"So I think there is compassion [talking about continuing to pay her domestic worker despite her domestic worker not being allowed to work during the lockdown]. We're not immune to that, but I think it's different to how we feel for example, the homeless on the street or the guy begging on the corner. Um, I think we see the beggar all the time. So it's just another beggar. But when you see the, the, the shop owner or the shop keeper or the waiter out of a job [during the lockdown], I think there is a little of compassion."

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[4] The detailed list of themes, subthemes, and corresponding participant quotations is available by request from the corresponding author.

AnnMarie (lower/mid, white), a doctor's assistant, mentioned engaging in cross-class comparisons with her employer:

"During the lockdown I've been comparing myself...with Doctor. I think they have a luxurious life. So they have the bigger houses, the fancy cars. We, I have a pretty standard house, pretty standard car."

Using language from Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) model of class work, we evidenced participants cognitively "looking up" to imagine the lives of the upper classes during lockdown, as well as "looking down" to imagine the lives of lower classes.

Looking up. As Sam (lower/mid, black) relates, he thinks the upper classes will weather the economic effects of the lockdown unscathed. He imagines that all upper-class people have investments that will insulate them from the economic fallout of the pandemic:

"I think upper class people are okay because they invested in factories and property."

Also in looking up, Patrick (lower/mid, black) says,

"Most of them have everything that they want. Even before the lockdown started, they were informed to buy food for themselves. With their money, everybody buy everything for themselves. But the poor ones were not told anything about it. Rich people cannot suffer from this situation."

Looking down. Looking down brings feelings of gratitude, appreciation for one's own job security, and empathy.

Kelly (upper, black) said, *"I feel really sad [about the job losses] and it makes me very grateful for the kind of industry I'm in and the job that I have."*

Thami (upper, black) said, *"It is a sad situation knowing that you've got job security and other people don't. So, it is always a sad situation knowing that other people are going to lose their jobs. And as a consequence of a virus and not because people have done anything wrong. It is always a sad one because it is an uncontrollable situation."*

Looking down versus looking up. Interestingly, in looking up several participants seemed to easily envision how life had changed for the upper class under the lockdown, providing detailed imagined notions of new limitations to the latter's lifestyle, while several other participants struggled to look down. In looking up, Queen (lower/mid, black) described the normally privileged life of the upper class in the context of inferring it has now changed:

"You know, when you rich you can go wherever you want. You know, you can do whatever you want. You can go to a restaurant, eat out every day, Monday to Friday. You go to, go overseas."

Sophie (lower/mid, black), also looking up, shared colorful examples of how the upper class experience the lockdown. Yet the authors noted the tone in which she related these details was sympathetic and nonjudgmental in nature.

"There are suffering because they can't get takeaways, they kind of go to the restaurants and sit there and eat, doing their socializing, going to their movies you know, is, is the things that they suffer, not going to the sea or overseas. [Not] eating outside is things that they suffer for them."

In comparison, the reactions of those looking down to imagine how the lockdown had affected persons of lower classes seemed to vary widely. Winston (upper, white) seemed to stammer a bit and was reluctant to answer the question of how he feels when he sees news coverage of South Africans losing their jobs. He replied,

"Um, I don't, that's a tough one, that's a very tough question."

And when asked about whether he thought upper class persons were getting involved to help low-wage workers who have lost their jobs, Winston replied,

"I don't think they think about it, that's the bad thing I don't think so."

Similarly, in her interview, AnnMarie (lower/mid, white), looked down (further, within class) to compare her revised work schedule where she was downgraded from full- to part-time, with a lower social class, black co-worker who had lost her job completely. Her quote suggests a lack of empathy for the coworker, and/or a desire to dismiss the coworker's plight as a serious one:

"At my work with [name of coworker], the lockdown isn't really that much of a problem for her. The reason for that is I know black people help each other and it's just that way. It's their culture. They'll always help each other. Not us. We're too proud."

On the other hand, some of those who looked down did seem to consider and empathize with the perspective of those less fortunate. Tumi (lower/mid, black), in looking down to those poorer than she, said,

"It makes me sad. This is the one thing that I am grateful for, at least I still have a job and can work. I ask myself, what about other people? What is going to happen to them? What is going to happen to people like street vendors? I know there are plans, in inverted commas, but are those plans really working for them? Now that we are going to level 4, what is going to happen still?"

And Kelly (upper, black), looking down, shared her emotional reactions to the plight of those less fortunate:

"And it is sad is that... when you and I hear about all these companies or the informal sector itself, struggling and then the people with formal jobs who were employed losing. So it has affected me emotionally a bit."

Cross-employer social class and privilege comparisons. Instead of how Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) theory has explained how class work originates from different social classes coming face-to-face in social encounters, we saw evidence of cross-class comparisons extra-organizationally. The lockdown forced comparisons between those fortunate enough to remain employed/work from home versus those whose jobs went away. Alice (upper, black) stated:

"there are moments of anxiety, when you hear and you do hear about people losing their jobs, thinking I'm next."

Sophie (lower/mid, black) said her comparisons led her to reappraise the status of her job and perhaps her personal worth because, compared to other workers in other workplaces, she was not an essential service provider, and was not allowed to work during lockdown while others could:

"You know, now I understand, like, I feel, I feel like, like I'm nothing you understand me, what I mean? ... I feel like my job is not so important."

Winston (upper, white) said, compared to the unemployed,

"... I'm not personally affected too much about people being, how can I say, people being [unemployed]... but I think that's, this is, this is a difficult time."

Interestingly, his comparison to other workers was not about his own attitudes and feelings, as in the two previous quotes, that is, about job security or self-worth, his cross-employer comparison went on to prescribe what *other* workers should do in the future to avoid job

precarity. From his position he advised unemployed people to create their own side jobs to

insulate themselves from crises like the pandemic:

"…maybe you should start thinking of having after the lockdown, having an additional second income, either passive or, you know, we talk about [names some friends]. They've got you know, these markets that they sometimes go on Saturday and they, and they sell the things that they make with their hands."

Social Class Intersects with Race

Class and race used interchangeably in discourse. While initial theorizing on class

work was rather silent on race, our findings pointed to the tight intersectionality of the two—

racialized class work. The analysis of many of our transcripts evidenced participants

switching between race and class in the same sentence, with black meaning poor and white

meaning wealthy. Tumi (lower/mid, black) synonymizes black and poor:

"When you are a black person, where are you going to get R700 to do a [virus] test when you do not have food. You would rather buy food."

Charlotte (lower/mid, black) assumes that all white people have healthcare benefits, and

although she and some other black people have made inroads into the middle class, most of

"us" are not privileged to have savings and safety nets:

"…race…does come in. As much as we can say that white people have medical aid etc... We are finding that the cost of living is just as high on them as it is for us. Because of where I'm working, I work at a financial institution and what I'm getting, it shows me that there are more middle-class people than they ever were before and as middle-class people we live above what we can afford."

In this same few sentences she switches between "we" as her identification with being black,

versus "we" as a member of the middle class, demonstrating intersectionality.

Black participants as transitioners/interpreters—living between social class worlds.

As earlier quotations have illustrated, some black participants seem to be living between two

social class worlds, sometimes identifying with the upper classes (which are more white), and

sometimes identifying with lower-class Blacks. For example, Charlotte (lower/mid, black)

stated that working in middle-class employment contexts gave her the cultural toolkit to understand white people (middle-class):

"Because of where I'm working, I work at a financial institution."

Tumi (lower/mid, black), on the other hand, sees herself as something of an interpreter for others (presumably upper-class Whites), to help them understand the realities of being a poor black person, living in an informal settlement:

"Some have got this judgement that low wage workers are ill-disciplined. They ask: 'why don't they stay at home?' You have to explain to those people that people like in Alexandra [informal settlement in Johannesburg] cannot stay at home. When people live in a one-roomed shack, how do you expect those people to be indoors the whole day?"

Tumi further used living near the poor to explain why she understood their plight:

"By the way, I also stay in Alex but in East Bank (middle-class part of Alexandra)."

Finally, Thabang (lower/mid, black) saw his role as something of an advocate for the poor, but also a translator, to help them understand the upper-classed world:

"Some people can say I am middle-class but I associate more with people from the lower class because I come from there and I have seen the inequality and the injustices... I am their voice wherever I can. Sometimes things are not designed for them to understand."

Black participants have normalized their lack of privilege. Lower/middle class black participants seemed to have almost accepted that Whites have privileged lives but they do not. When asked about who is suffering most under the lockdown, Queen (lower/mid, black) immediately confirmed that it was rich people:

"Uh, I might say rich people. You know, when you rich you can go wherever you want. You know, you can do whatever you want. You can go to a restaurant, eat out every day, Monday to Friday. You go to, go overseas."

When asked if these rich people were white or black, she laughed and said *"White!"*

Similarly Sophie (lower/mid, black) called not being able to get takeout food and eat in restaurants *"suffering"* for Whites, and eating in restaurants and socializing *"their life."*

Potential for pandemic to unite people across race and class. Finally, our data revealed that some participants seemed to see the pandemic as something that connects themselves to each other and to the rest of the world, especially more developed nations and that invoked pride in the face of crisis. Thabang (lower/mid, black) was happy that for the first time lower-class black South Africans were not the only losers when it came to infection, in comparison to, we presume, HIV and tuberculosis. Furthermore, he viewed COVID-19 as "equal opportunity" across developed and less developed nations. Yet Winston's (upper, white) identification with the rest of the world via the pandemic seemed to be a way of denying race and class as divisive and privileging for him. He compares the pandemic to the feelings he had about commonality with other South Africans upon the winning of the rugby World Cup in 1995. Thabang (lower/mid, black) said,

"It is interesting to watch how the whole world has been affected by this particular thing. It is not about a third world or first world."

He brings in race and class with:

"It is a lovely time to be around right now... I never thought I would witness something like this in my life. Where I do not have to discuss a health problem that is only associated to a specific race or lower class. For obvious reasons, lower class."

And from Winston (upper, white):

"It feels, it feels like for some odd or strange reason South Africa has something now in, um, almost in, um, it's like the World Cup we've won in 1995. We've got something in common now."

Discussion

In this research we asked two questions. First, *are national lockdowns class salient events evoking "class work?"* We identified related subthemes of looking up and looking down, even across employers, that is, the comparing of one's social position and privilege with others during the lockdown which prompted class work. Our second question was, *how does class work intersect with race in making sense of inequality and privilege during the lockdown? Are there differences in how different racial groups do class work?* Related

subthemes included the substitutability of race and class in the discourse of discussing inequality and privilege, black participants as interpreters across social classes, lower/middle class black participants normalizing a lack of privilege in their class work, and the potential for the pandemic to unite persons across race and class.

Related to research question one, our primary contributions with this study are naming the idea of a social class shock event and situating the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown as an event material to social class work. Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) explain how members of different social classes, who work for the same organization, experience existential anxiety when they physically interact during cross-class encounters. Our first extension to their theorizing is that we stretch their relational ideas beyond the walls of organizations. We found that participants compared their privilege across social classes without any contact with other workers, that is, extra-organizationally. Our participants, in the absence of within-organization rules and practices, still normalized class differences by employing racial and social class stereotypes (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). So larger, societal events can trigger cross-class comparisons even when persons of different classes do not interact physically (Leigh & Melwani, 2019). The news of the pandemic on television and social media, with associated job losses and suffering, seemed to prompt individuals to engage in class work. As Steyn and Foster (2008) relate, status quo (non-pandemic) white, middle class South Africa discovers images of "the other" "through the newspapers and TV, and the nature of the gaze emanates from an armchair…" (p. 33). We acknowledge our interviews could have encouraged these comparisons, but discourse like *"During the lockdown, I've been comparing myself…"* (AnnMarie) leads us to believe this has been occurring during the lockdown irrespective of our interviews. Theory-wise, we find links to Festinger's (1954) theory of social comparison—that cognitive comparisons generate important knowledge about the self—and especially his similarity hypothesis—that we prefer

to compare ourselves to individuals similar to us. We found cross-class comparisons, at least for those looking down, to be associated with a level of discomfort. While Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) work is silent on non-face-to-face comparisons, more akin to social comparison research, we find that comparisons occur even when the referent is as distant as a person in a news story or on a social media site (e.g., Vogel et al., 2014). Social class shock events may encourage wide, physically distant comparisons, across types of jobs, employers, and classes.

The idea of a shock event is not new to the academic literature. Crawford et al. (2019) theorized that dual-earner couple work-life shock events, which are disruptions such as a work promotion or the unexpected illness of one partner, prompt sense-making. As far as shocks related to social class, we are unaware of other research that has proposed *social class* shock events, the closest being macroeconomic research on negative income shocks, e.g., massive loan defaults (McGregor, 2005). We argue that the societal disruption posed by the pandemic has disrupted the status quo, perhaps especially for upper class South Africans who can live in bubbles (Schuermans, 2011)[5] where they are not confronted with poverty. While this is physical distancing in contrast to Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) *cognitive distancing*, we argue the 24/7 news cycle and personal lockdown compliance have shocked individuals to engage cognitively about other classes, despite physical distance, resulting in people "peeking around" the firewall which otherwise segregates the classes (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013).

Our second expansion of Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) model is that they assume lower class members will engage in certain types of class work, such as denigrating the upper class or attempting to pass as a higher social class, because they know they are seen by upper

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[5] Despite the end of apartheid and legal race-based housing segregation, evidence exists that racial segregation is being replaced today by social class segregation (Geyer & Mohammed, 2016).

classes as less socially desirable. However, we saw little if any denigration of upper classes or denial of lower/middle classhood by lower/middle class participants. In fact, they often normalized the disparity between themselves and the upper classes who eat in restaurants and go to the sea, versus their less privileged styles, as evidenced by the matter-of-fact way in which they expounded on upper-class lifestyles. This seems to be the opposite of what Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) would predict. Their model would specify that lower-class class work should involve deriding the upper classes or "accept[ing]society's definition and blam[ing] themselves for their failure" (Eitzen & Smith, 2003, p. 62). We evidenced beliefs more akin to "buying into" the dominant discourse of inequality without blame (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013, p. 682). While we do not know for sure why some of our participants seemed to engage in no or little class work in this way, we speculate that historical, especially race-based, factors in the South African context, with decades of systemic deprivation under apartheid, played a role. Perhaps lower-class South Africans' class work could be longer-term and more structural than current theorizing acknowledges. What we evidenced may be similar to Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) class work called *embracing the myth of meritocracy* yet different: The structural constraints that prohibited the social class mobility of marginalized racial groups during apartheid have now been outlawed and the discourse today is that previously disadvantaged people have better social mobility opportunities than ever (Bray et al., 2010; Telzak, 2012; Wale, 2013). As well, the high visibility of a handful of affluent people from previously marginalized groups (often called the "black diamonds") leads many to believe this is true (Bray et al., 2010). So lower-class participants may normalize their lack of privilege because they perceive their social class location and especially their children's is temporary (Bray et al., 2010; Wale, 2013). Perhaps the tension and need to restore equilibrium through engaging in cognitive class work is not an immediate imperative for those lower-class South Africans awaiting upward class movement. While

they may *embrace the myth of meritocracy* as in Gray and Kish-Gephart's theorizing (2013), the content of these beliefs may be less about the denial of systematic discrimination's potential to suppress individual achievement, as often espoused in the West. In South Africa, the belief in meritocracy may be a long-game, where people believe that the eradication of systematic discrimination which was institutionalized by apartheid will take time, but eventually structural barriers will be lifted so all will enjoy equal access to advancement opportunities.

Unpacking research question two, another main contribution of the study is the illumination of racialized class work—an intersection not specified in Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) original theorizing. The lockdown was a shock to sense-making about the social class system, but also a site to magnify intractable race-based assumptions. Although other work on social class has recognized the importance of intersecting it with race (e.g., Martin & Côté, 2019), our study reveals the nature and complexity of racialized social class work—done by both white and black participants. As intersectional theorists have argued, we found class and race work to be simultaneous (e.g., Moore-Berg & Karpinski, 2019). We found evidence that participants normalized race distinctions and privilege during the lockdown in ways that interacted or even substituted for social class. As Durante and Fiske (2017) state, nations with high income-inequality such as South Africa have complex stereotype maps which legitimize and perpetuate unequal systems. This is illustrated in our data by a white participant's assumption that black people will be fine during the lockdown because they always take care of each other, yet the very person she points to as an example has lost her job and has no income. This cognitive work neutralizes uncomfortable privilege but also perpetuates a system of inequality (Kunda, 1990).

Our second race-based finding was that some black participants lived between low-income (predominantly black) and upper-class (predominantly white) social class worlds and

played a translating role for members of both social classes (Martin & Côté, 2019),

seemingly able to speak across class lines during the lockdown. Their vacillation between

"we" and "they" in the same sentence inferred they live in a liminal space between lower-

class Blacks and upper-class Whites, as able to understand and interpret across groups. These

individuals and/or their families, due to the end of apartheid, are likely relatively recent

upward social class transitioners who are bicultural (Stephens et al., 2014), having moved

from one socio-cultural context with its norms to another socio-cultural context with different

norms (Martin & Côte, 2019). As noted earlier, Gray and Kish-Gephart's (2013) model

predicts that transitioners would engage in strategies to repel the under classes and reinforce

their distinction, that is, to try to "pass" as people divorced from low-income contexts to

mitigate their fears of losing recently gained privilege. Yet, in contrast, our data evidenced

that these transitioners were open to revealing that they understood the life of lower-class

Blacks during the lockdown. This is more of a fit with Martin and Cote's (2019) ideas on the

value of social class transitioners as interpreters, who are interested in educating others about

why differences exist: Those who have transitioned between classes have "insights and

abilities as a result of moving up or down …well suited to bridge cultural differences within

groups" (p. 619). To this, we add that this bridging was likely prompted by the social class

shock event of the pandemic. However, Martin and Côte (2019) state that translating and

interpreting is a demanding and resource-consuming strategy. Further, there is a gap in the

literature on why people choose to translate when assimilating into the dominant culture

could ease their social mobility (Carter, 2003; Neckerman et al., 1999) or not assimilating

could allow them to feel that they are still authentic (Carter, 2003; Molinsky, 2013). In the

example of Thabang, he seemed to feel good about his role as an advocate for the poor,

where his roots lie. The reasons behind the persistence of some social class transitioners to

serve as interpreters is an area ripe for further inquiry.

A final race-based finding was that even the hope of positive effects of the pandemic was racialized. We were surprised that both black and white participants viewed the pandemic as, in part, positive and uniting, and involved *minimizing differences* (Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013) between individuals. One white participant compared the pandemic to the Springboks Rugby World Cup win in 1995—as a race equalizer (Farquharson & Marjoribanks, 2003; Rees, 1996)—a national moment that could bring together otherwise adversarial social groups. In contrast to this, we note research has shown the World Cup win to be a "utopian moment" which failed to result in a non-racialized South Africa (Steenveld & Strelitz, 1998, p. 625). Black participants who remarked on pandemic positivity also saw it as a leveling factor across races, *minimizing differences*, but in a very different way. They felt that because all races (and those in developed as well as developing nations) can contract COVID-19, it does not perpetuate the stigma of poor South Africans and disease, as does presumably HIV and TB. So, for some black participants, the pandemic meant everyone was equal in *not* having privilege, that is, not being immune to possible infection.

In sum, we found class work to take various forms based on one's race and social position. For our white participants, the pandemic served as a lens to help them disavow the existence of systematic discrimination, and perhaps reduce the anxiety of living with privilege. We evidenced what Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) call *minimizing differences*, as well as *normalizing differences* between classes ("Blacks will always take care of each other"), perhaps to assuage guilt. In contrast, we evidenced black class work vary across classes. Lower/middle class black participants, contrary to Gray and Kish-Gephart's predictions (2013), either 1) failed to engage in class work at all when making comparisons between themselves and upper classes; they unexpectedly accepted and normalized a lack of privilege. Or, they 2) bridged between upper classes and the lives of lower/middle class Blacks, as social class transitioners who could translate and span the cultural divide. In the

black upper class we also found evidence of social class bridging—transitioners who had the cultural capital to understand ways of life distinct from what they currently experienced. This level of connection and understanding across class is not evidenced in the Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) typology of ways in which upper classes do class work, which are instead focused more on disavowing privilege. We note the Gray and Kish-Gephart (2013) framework mirrors more closely the social class work performed by white participants as opposed to black participants in this study.

Generalizability

Our findings variably apply to class and race relations in Africa and across the globe. In South Africa COVID-19 is a tale of two pandemics based on social class and race. Across nations, social class and racial distinctions are omnipresent, but may look different based on the particular sociocultural and economic context. For much of Africa, racialized social class gaps are a pernicious remnant of colonialism. A new example, from Lesotho, are tensions that loom large between Chinese migrants, working for a better future for their children back home, versus high unemployment and scarce resources for the majority, black Basotho people (Coe & Pauli, 2020).

Turning to the context of COVID-19 in the West, in the U.S., Blacks and Latinos are dying from COVID-19 at three times the rate of white Americans (Pilkington, 2020). In England and Wales, the poor experience 55.1 deaths per 100,000 people versus 25.3 for those living in affluent areas (Pidd et al., 2020). While we acknowledge our sample size was small, our findings tentatively positioned South Africa as an extreme test case through which to magnify the experience of racialized class work and inequality. As Barnard (2020) relates about research in Africa, "Our conditions are extreme, but they are not unique. Because they are so extreme, they help us see more clearly what exactly is going on. But because they are not unique, our insights can be of value for scholars from across the world" (p. 4). For

example, while more than half of Blacks in South Africa live in poverty compared to 23% in the U.S. (U.S. Census, 2017), stereotypes that all minority members are in the lower social class persist in both countries (Gray et al., 2018). Real demographic breakdowns may differ, but much of our theorizing about the psychology of social class, race, and privilege may generalize more widely.

Managerial/Practical Implications

Often the less privileged bear the worst effects of crises (e.g., Dymski et al., 2013). While devastating materially and psychologically, we argue crises may also serve as shock events causing us to "walk a mile in another's shoes." We evidenced looking down and looking up, across social class and race—what we believe may be individuals engaging in perspective taking. Perspective taking is the cognitive act of considering the perspective or world view of another (Davis, 1983; Galinsky et al., 2005). While some of our lower-class black participants seemed to engage in little to no class work, and instead seemed to normalize their lack of privilege as discussed above, we found clear evidence of some, usually upper-class, participants engaging in perspective taking. This has the potential to reduce stereotyping (Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000), increase historical understanding (Davis et al., 2001), and encourage cooperation (Johnson, 1975) and prosocial behavior (Batson et al., 1997) (Gehlbach, 2004, p. 3). As an example from our study, Thami (upper, black) attributed joblessness to *"a consequence of a virus and not because people have done anything wrong."* As such, upper-class class work stemming from the pandemic could potentially generate empathy for the lower/middle classes. Perspective taking is needed today in South Africa but also across the globe, as recent Black Lives Matter protests against police brutality of black men and women in the United States and beyond attest. While South Africa has a long way to go toward cross-racial understanding, what is hopeful is that we found

evidence of people reaching across racial and social class lines, to think about what life is like for others during the shock event of the lockdown.

For organizations, our recommendation is that employers recognize that macro events can prompt micro-level racialized class work for employees. This may be an opportunity for powerful, transformative conversations in organizations (Leigh & Melwani, 2019), as perspective taking and empathic concern are trainable behaviors that can improve one's own and others' outcomes at work (Gilin et al., 2013). So for organizations who wish to continue the perspective taking begun by the lockdowns, many excellent training resources exist (e.g., McIntosh, 1990; Scully et al., 2018). One tool is the "day-in-the-life" writing-based intervention (Macrae et al., 1994), which Ragins and Ehrhardt (2020) have recently shown increases empathy and diversity voice (speaking up for diversity at work), and willingness to develop cross-race friendships. Effective, harmonious cross-race and -class friendships have the power to improve workplace social relations, but this type of diversity management also has implications for enhancing workgroup task performance as well (e.g., Pieterse et al., 2013). As well, perspective taking during the lockdown may have implications for addressing the much-lamented war for talent in Africa. Brain drain has typically been conceptualized narrowly, privileging an upper-class view of education, talent, and skills (Brown & Tannock, 2009). Perhaps what is needed to ensure African companies have sufficient human resources is a broader view of human capital, one where lower-class persons are not hastily excluded from jobs based on traditional measures (e.g., education pedigree, Western cultural capital). If organizational decision makers can engage in perspective-taking, perhaps lower-class individuals will be seen as valuable hires, even in the absence of non-traditional skill sets.

Will perspective taking decrease once the lockdowns have ended and the world "goes back to normal"—everyone stratified in his or her own social class and race in workplaces and society at large? Or will empathy for the other be a legacy of the pandemic? While this is

uncharted territory, research shows that "some crises may be 'defining moments,' leading to a permanently changed level of inequality or [at least] a change in direction of its trend" (Atkinson & Morelli, 2011, p. 2). We have evidenced racialized social class work here, and we encourage scholars to take this forward, to follow its longer-term implications for social relations in Africa and the world.

Notes on Contributors

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Table 1

Sample demographics

Participant[6]	Occupation	Social Class		Race	Sex	Age	Number of Children	Married /Partnered	In Lockdown With	Interview Cohort	Highest Education Level
		Self-identified	Income-based[7]								
Albert	Petrol attendant	Lower	Lower	Black	Male	40	3	Yes	Wife, three children	Time 1	Grade 11
Alice	Project manager	Middle	Upper	Coloured	Female	42	0	Yes	No one	Time 2	Diploma
AnnMarie	Doctor's assistant	Middle	Middle	White	Female	27	0	Yes	Partner	Time 2	Diploma
Bongani	General Counsel	Middle	Upper	Black	Male	36	2	Yes	Wife, two children and helper	Time 1	Master's degree
Busi	Head of Project Office	Upper	Upper	Black	Female	39	3	Yes	Partner, three children and helper	Time 1	Master's degree
Charlotte	Contact agent	Middle	Middle	Black	Female	35	0	No	Four friends	Time 1	Grade 12
John	Self-employed	Lower	Lower	Black	Male	47	4	Yes	Wife, four children	Time 2	Grade 11
Kelly	Product manager	Upper	Upper	Black	Female	38	0	No	Cousin	Time 1	Master's degree
Lesego	Office cleaner	Middle	Lower	Black	Female	53	0	Yes	Husband, mother and sister	Time 2	Grade 12
Lily	Business development researcher	Middle	Middle	Black	Female	31	0	No	Mother, sister	Time 1	Honours degree
Melanie	Underwriter	Middle	Middle	Coloured	Female	42	1	Yes	Husband, child, mother	Time 2	Higher certificate

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[6] Fictitious names.

[7] We allocated social class based on income according to the South African guidelines presented by Burger et al. (2015), adjusted upwards to account for 2020 inflation. The resulting social class classifications are generally in line with participants' self-identified social class though two participants claiming middle class membership are considered upper class based on their income.

Mpho	Domestic worker	Lower	Lower	Black	Female	46	4	Yes	Husband, three children, niece and her two children	Time 2	Grade 12
Patrick	Self-employed	Lower	Lower	Black	Male	24	1	No	Parents, nine siblings	Time 1	Grade 12
Petrus	Shopkeeper	Lower	Lower	Black	Male	27	1	No	Mother, sister, grandmother and two nephews	Time 2	Grade 12
Queen	Front of house café manager	Middle	Middle	Black	Female	29	2	Yes	Husband, one child	Time 1	Grade 12
Sam	Lower school Principal	Middle	Middle	Black	Male	62	2	Yes	Wife, daughter and one grandchild	Time 1	Postgraduate certificate
Sophie	Beauty therapist	Lower	Middle	Black	Female	39	1	No	Son	Time 2	Grade 12
Thabang	Self-employed	Middle	Middle	Black	Male	36	1	No	Sister and her two children, helper and his child	Time 2	Grade 12
Thami	Business intelligence manager	Upper	Upper	Black	Male	35	1	No	Partner, child	Time 1	Degree
Tumi	Property analyst	Middle	Middle	Black	Female	35	1	No	Aunt, son	Time 1	Degree
Winston	Financial Manager of a mine	Upper	Upper	White	Male	32	0	Yes	Wife	Time 1	Honours degree

Appendix

Interview Protocols

Upper class participants

1. Before we start, do you know anyone who has tested positive and/or fallen ill from COVID?

Probe: If yes, how close a connection is the contact (i.e., family, close friend, acquaintance)?

2. Please tell us about how the lockdown has affected how and where you do your work.

3. What feelings have you experienced related to work during the lockdown?

Probe: If negative feelings, how have you coped with these?

Probe: What has made you feel better?

4. There has been a lot of TV news coverage and social media coverage of South Africans losing their jobs and suffering during the lockdown. How do you feel when you see these reports? How do you cope with knowing this?

5. What demographic groups (e.g., racial groups, social class groups, men or women) do you think have been hit the hardest from the lockdown?

6. When the rules were made about who could keeping working, where you could go, what you could buy, etc., during the lockdown, who do you think the government was thinking of/looking out for?

7. Do you know any low-wage workers who are suffering? How do you know they are?

8. Do you mind sharing whether you identify with being lower, middle, or upper class? Why do you say this?

9. How do you think other middle or upper class South Africans feel when they see these events happening to low-wage workers? Do you think they are getting involved in some way?

Probe: Are charities the way to help?

Probe: If not, who should fix this problem? How?

10. Anything else you'd like to share?

Lower class participants

1. Before we start, do you know anyone who has tested positive and/or fallen ill from COVID?

Probe: If yes, how close a connection is the contact (i.e., family, close friend, acquaintance)?

2. Please tell us about how the lockdown has affected how and where you do your work.

3. What feelings have you experienced related to work during the lockdown?

Probe: If negative feelings, how have you coped with these?

Probe: What has made you feel better?

4. There has been a lot of TV news coverage and social media coverage of South Africans losing their jobs and suffering during the lockdown. How do you feel when you see these reports? How do you cope with knowing this?

5. What demographic groups (e.g., racial groups, social class groups, men or women) do you think have been hit the hardest from the lockdown?

6. When the rules were made about who could keeping working, where you could go, what you could buy, etc., during the lockdown, who do you think the government was thinking of/looking out for?

7. Do you mind sharing whether you identify with being lower, middle, or upper class? Why do you say this?

8. How do you think middle or upper class South Africans feel when they see negative events happening to lower class South Africans during the lockdown? Do you think they are getting involved in some way?

9. Do you know any upper class workers who are suffering?

Probe: How do you know they are?

Probe: What does their suffering look like?

10. Some say Corona virus is the fault of upper class South Africans—that their international travel has brought the virus into the country. Do you agree that it's upper class South Africans' fault?

Probe: If so, should they take responsibility in some way?

11. Anything else you'd like to share?

Demographics (all participants)

1. How old are you?

2. What is your racial group?

3. How do you earn an income? (regularly, and if different, during the lockdown)?

4. If you don't mind sharing, approximately what is your normal monthly income in Rand? (and during the lockdown?)

5. What percentage of your total household income do you earn?

6. Do you have children? If so, how many, and what are their ages?

7. Are you married or partnered?

8. How many family members are living with you?

9. Do you own or rent (or another arrangement?) the place where you live?

10. What is your highest level of education?