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SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY AND TALENT UTILIZATION OF WORKERS FROM POORER BACKGROUNDS: THE OVERLOOKED IMPORTANCE OF WITHIN-ORGANIZATION DYNAMICS

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Socioeconomic mobility, or the ability of individuals to improve their socioeconomic standing through merit-based contributions, is a fundamental ideal of modern societies. The key focus of societal efforts to ensure socioeconomic mobility has been on the provision of educational opportunities. We review evidence that even with the same education and job opportunities, being born into a poorer family undermines socioeconomic mobility because of processes occurring within organizations. The burden of poorer background might, *ceteris paribus*, be economically comparable to the gender gap. We argue that in the societal and scientific effort to promote socioeconomic mobility, the key context in which mobility is supposed to happen—organizations—and the key part of the life of people striving toward socioeconomic advancement—that as working adults—have been overlooked. We integrate the organizational literature, pointing to key within-organizational processes impacting objective (socioeconomic) success with research, some emergent in organizational sciences and some disciplinary, on when, why, and how people from poorer backgrounds behave or are treated by others in the relevant situations. Integrating these literatures generates a novel and useful framework for identifying issues people born into poorer families face as employees, systematizes extant evidence and makes it more accessible to organizational scientists, and allows us to lay the agenda for future organizational scholarship. Our hope is that the current review will help bring organizational science—in our view, the best equipped domain of scholarship for studying how workers from different backgrounds fare in organizations—to the forefront of the quest for promoting socioeconomic mobility of workers coming from poorer families.

Socioeconomic mobility, or the ability of individuals to improve their socioeconomic standing (SES) through merit-based contributions, is a fundamental ideal of modern societies (Lynn, Podolny, & Tao, 2009; Parsons, 1951; Weber, 1978 [1956]). People have no control over whether they are born into poor or rich families and should therefore not be rewarded or punished for their status at birth. With the rise of different forms of humanism over the past several centuries, societies became increasingly

invested in creating opportunities for people born into poorer families to work their way up to a material comfort and a satisfying life. The key focus of such societal efforts is on the provision of educational opportunities. Most countries strive to make basic education available to everyone, and many countries introduce various types of programs to provide opportunities for people born into poorer families to become as highly educated as those born into richer families. In line with this focus, a vast body of research studies, from work in education (Walpole, 2003) to social psychology (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012), is dedicated to understanding how people from poorer families fare in the educational system.

In this review, we argue that the role of organizations, and within-organizational dynamics in particular, in promoting socioeconomic mobility has

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been underappreciated. This has important negative implications for both equality of opportunity and organizational effectiveness. Education can certainly be thought of as an important precondition for mobility, but its key goal is to allow socioeconomic advancement to commence and occur through work that takes place after. People born into poorer families are literally expected to “work their way up,” with most of that work occurring within organizations (The World Bank, 2018). However, the ease or difficulty with which people from poorer families actually achieve socioeconomic mobility through work in organizations, and more generally the extent to which they manage to adjust and prosper as employees, has not received sufficient attention. For example, Christie and Barling (2009) note that workers’ SES has “usually been treated as nuisance variables whose influence must be excluded” (pp. 1474–1475). Thus, it seems that in the societal and scientific effort to promote socioeconomic mobility, the key context in which it is supposed to happen—organizations—as well as the key part of the life of people striving toward socioeconomic advancement—that as working adults—has been overlooked.

Despite the effort to equalize educational opportunities, individuals from poorer families face numerous challenges on entering organizations. One indicative class of evidence of this fact comes from research in economics, which finds that lower parental income is associated with lower returns (in terms of future income) on the same educational attainment (see Bartik & Hershbein, 2018, for recent estimates; see also Torche, 2011). An early study by Pfeffer (1977b) provides a particularly strong demonstration of this fact. Pfeffer showed that graduating from the prestigious MBA program at Berkeley opened the doors to organizations to students, irrespective of their socioeconomic origin (*i.e.*, there was no evidence of discrimination at the time of hiring), but that even among this population with elite education, individuals coming from poorer families ended up with much lower salaries 10 years down the line (see also Dreher, Dougherty, & Whitely, 1985; Pfeffer, 1977a). Thus, dynamics within organizations occurring after students joined the organization (whether stemming from their own or others’ behavior) seem to have created impediments to how well students from poorer backgrounds fared as employees.

Similar results to the ones obtained by Pfeffer (1977b) have more recently been documented by Laurison and Friedman (2016: 668), who analyzed a

large dataset ($N = 43,444$) based on Britain’s Labour Force Survey, and showed that “even when people who are from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering high-status occupations, they earn 17 percent less, on average, than individuals from privileged backgrounds” and note that the effect “remains substantial even net of a variety of important predictors of earnings.” They conclude that “beyond entry, the mobile population often faces an earnings *class ceiling* within high-status occupations” (emphasis added). The pay gap identified by Laurison and Friedman (2016) is comparable to the gender pay gap (Blau & Kahn, 2017). Whereas research on gender equality now represents one of the most active areas of organizational research as well as organizational and public policy interventions, the fact that being born into a poorer family undermines socioeconomic mobility through within-organizational dynamics seems largely ignored.

We argue that research on individual and interpersonal mechanisms occurring within organizations that introduce obstacles for employees from poorer backgrounds is available, but disorganized, disconnected, and as a result underused by organizational scholars. The organizational literature has identified key individual and interpersonal workplace behaviors impacting objective (socioeconomic) success (Eby, Butts, & Lockwood, 2003; Ng, Eby, Sorensen, & Feldman, 2005). This literature points to key organizational behaviors through which socioeconomic mobility of employees from poorer backgrounds *can* be undermined. We integrate these findings with research, some emergent in organizational sciences and some disciplinary, on when, why, and how people from poorer backgrounds behave or are treated by others in the relevant situations. Integrating and reviewing these literatures generate a novel and useful framework for identifying issues employees from poorer backgrounds face as employees, systematizes extant evidence and makes it more accessible to organizational scientists, and allows us to lay the agenda for future organizational scholarship. Our hope is that the current review will be instrumental in bringing organizational science—in our view the most relevant and best equipped domain of scholarship for studying whether workers from poorer backgrounds actually advance through work—to the forefront of the societal quest for promoting socioeconomic mobility.

Creating an integrated understanding of how employees from poorer backgrounds fare as employees

also has the potential to lead to large-scale gains for organizations in terms of their employees' productivity and satisfaction. Specifically, there are major negative "implications for economic efficiency if the talents of those from poorer families are underdeveloped or not fully used, as those from poorer backgrounds will not live up to their productive potential" (Blanden, 2013). To the extent that dynamics within organizations prevent employees from poorer backgrounds from performing, advancing, and making an impact to their full potential, this represents a missed opportunity for organizations in terms of talent utilization. Moving beyond the U.S. example cited earlier, and to provide one illustration of the sheer scale and importance of the phenomenon our review tackles, consider the example of India. In India, as in most other countries, the key attempt to improve socioeconomic mobility of individuals coming from the historically disadvantaged backgrounds ("Scheduled Caste" and "Scheduled Tribe") is through affirmative action quotas in the educational system, with, *e.g.*, 22.5 percent of the positions in institutions of higher education funded by the central government being reserved for such individuals. Around 28.2 percent of the population falls in this category (India Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, 2011), which as of 2018 translates into a population surpassing that of the entire population of the United States. Thus, there are literally millions of workers coming from disadvantaged backgrounds entering organizations after completing their higher education in India alone. A more precise understanding of the experience of such employees, which we seek to build and promote through this review, will be essential in helping organizations successfully integrate workers from poorer families and ensure they perform to their full potential, ultimately promoting socioeconomic mobility as well as talent utilization on a large scale.

Our review focuses on individual and interpersonal behaviors occurring within organizations and as such differs from and complements existing reviews that examined structural barriers to socioeconomic mobility, *e.g.*, introduced through technological change (Ford, 2015), changing employment relationships (Bidwell, Briscoe, Fernandez-Mateo, & Sterling, 2013), and neighborhood effects (Corcoran, 1995). Across different employment relationships and technologies used, it is important to understand specific individual behaviors occurring among organizational members that hold employees from poorer families back. Our review also complements reviews

of research on the psychology of social class (Piff, Kraus, & Keltner, 2018; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014) and on how a lack of material resources impacts basic psychological functioning (Banerjee & Duflo, 2012; Haushofer & Fehr, 2014), both of which are informative for understanding issues poor people face more generally. Yet, this research is not concerned with the organizational context and specific processes within organizations that shape employees' success and well-being. For example, none of the articles discusses issues workers from poorer backgrounds would encounter adjusting as newcomers, managing work—family conflict, or engaging in voluntary skill development. Our review is focused on the organizational context specifically and as such aims to provide organizations and managers with actionable insights (beyond general claims concerning the psychology of poverty) for addressing issues workers from poorer backgrounds face, as well as provide organizational scholars with a platform for advancing knowledge on the topic, and thus joining the broader discussion concerning socioeconomic mobility.

Finally, our review differs from and complements prior organizational reviews of empirical research on psychological effects of employee income and social class. One set of these reviews was primarily concerned with defining the construct of social class and suggested its importance as a driver of employee behavior but has not specifically considered barriers to mobility and talent utilization of employees from poorer backgrounds within organizations (Côté, 2011; Loinon & Woehr, 2018). Another set of reviews was focused on psychological differences between workers who are presently in high-income jobs relative to those in low-income jobs (Kossek, Huber-Yoder, Castellino, & Lerner, 1997; Leana & Meuris, 2015; Leana, Mittal, & Stiehl, 2012; Meuris & Leana, 2015; Pitesa, Thau, & Pillutla, 2017). These reviews are important, and we believe that they signal a growing interest in understanding micro-level organizational processes associated with socioeconomic differences. However, they do not tackle the question of how employees from poorer backgrounds who do attain desired jobs fare within organizations and whether within-organizational processes undermine the promise of their socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization. Our review thus extends past work through a comprehensive and problem-driven summary of findings concerning employees from poorer backgrounds, and in turn offers a stronger integration of organizational scholarship with the broader scientific and social effort to promote socioeconomic mobility.

WITHIN-ORGANIZATION DYNAMICS IMPACTING SOCIOECONOMIC MOBILITY AND TALENT UTILIZATION OF WORKERS FROM POORER BACKGROUNDS.

Framework

In line with macro-level literatures on inequality and socioeconomic mobility (Milanovic, 2016), as well as micro-level literature on objective socioeconomic attainment (Judge, Cable, Boudreau, & Bretz, 1995; Ng et al., 2005; Wilensky, 1961), our focal construct concerns relative differences in material resources, or means of obtaining valued goods and services through economic transactions (*e.g.*, money and other assets; Jones, 1976). We examine how coming from a relatively poorer versus richer background (*e.g.*, family one is born into) impacts socioeconomic attainment potential, or the ability to earn resources and obtain valued outcomes. In our conceptualization, “socioeconomic attainment” and “a richer versus poorer background” are relative constructs. Given the same absolute amount of resources, one could be considered as relatively rich several centuries ago but perhaps relatively poor several centuries from now, assuming economic growth. The opportunity for advancement in one’s standing relative to one’s contemporaries is important because the kinds of valued outcomes available to provide comfort and safety at any given point in history depend on the relative amount of resources at one’s disposal. For example, those with relatively more resources are able to afford better childcare, nutrition, education, health care for oneself and one’s family, and safety from harm, than are those with fewer resources. This has been true several centuries ago, it is true presently, and unless valued outcomes become unlimited, it will be true several centuries from now. Our key concern (and the key concern of most modern societies) is whether people are able to earn the material resources needed to obtain valued outcomes such as the ones listed previously on an equitable basis and not on the basis of their status at birth. Socioeconomic differences have been conceptualized in other ways (Côté, 2011; Loignon & Woehr, 2018), including, most notably, as differences in educational attainment. However, given that our focus is on explaining why, given the same educational opportunities and attainment, those from poorer backgrounds do not attain the same objective career success, such measures of social stratification are not appropriate for the current review.

We ground our review in research on objective career success (Eby et al., 2003; Ng et al., 2005),

which points to a limited set of key microorganizational processes shaping employees’ objective (socioeconomic) career attainment. The literature on objective career, and thus success, serves as our criterion for identifying the most important microorganizational pathways through which employees *can* advance in terms of their SES. We summarize the key antecedents (major predictors) of objective career success identified by past work (Eby et al., 2003; Ng et al., 2005) on the left-hand side of Table 1. The antecedents are classified into those concerning employees’ own behavior (in turn subclassified into work capacity and work style) and those concerning how employees are treated by others (in turn subclassified into opportunity provision and assistance provision).

With respect to own behavior, we distinguish between work capacity factors and work style factors depending on the most relevant reason why the given factor impedes objective career success. Work capacity factors undermine work success primarily because one is unable to perform a certain action even if one is willing to (*e.g.*, because of a lower familiarity with recent technological solutions). Such factors might themselves be caused by individuals’ preferences or dispositions (*e.g.*, lower proclivity for voluntary learning), but ultimately they translate into a lack of certain abilities, which itself presents a barrier to one’s success even if in the given situation, one would be willing to use the given ability (*e.g.*, use recent technological solutions). By contrast, work style factors focus on the fact that even when an employee has the capacity to perform a certain action (*e.g.*, initiate a positive change in the organization), coming from a poorer background might decrease one’s propensity to do so (*e.g.*, because of lower personal initiative).

With respect to how employees are treated by others, we distinguish between opportunity provision and assistance provision factors in line with Chugh and Brief (2008), who highlight that disadvantage generated through third-party treatment can occur in critical one-off events such as selection (which they refer to as gateways) as well as through more subtle forms of everyday activities and interactions (which they refer to as pathways). Chugh and Brief (2008) argue that the former class of behaviors (opportunity provision) is the focus of most of the thinking about discrimination (*e.g.*, discrimination in selection decisions), whereas the latter class of interactions (assistance provision) may go unnoticed, while being potentially equally relevant. We agree and review work on how employees from

TABLE 1
Integrative Framework of Within-Organization Dynamics Hindering Socioeconomic Mobility and Talent Utilization of Workers from Poorer Backgrounds

Class of Antecedents of Objective Career Success	Key Specific Within-Organizational Antecedents of Objective Career Success	Sample Research Suggesting Reproduction of Disadvantage
Employee's own behavior		
Work capacity	Nonwork circumstances impacting work	Lubrano (2004)
	Voluntary learning	Mittal and Griskevicius (2014)
	Political skill	Belmi and Laurin (2016)
Work style	Personal initiative	Kohn et al. (1986)
	Positive outlook	Orth (2018)
	Openness to experience	Ayoub et al. (2018)
Third-party treatment		
Opportunity provision	Selection decisions	Rivera and Tilcsik (2016)
	Performance evaluations	Pfeffer (1977b)
	Mentoring	Whitely et al. (1991)
Assistance provision	Assistance with socialization	Lareau (2015)
	Assistance with work skill development	Nadler and Chernyak-Hai (2014)
	Assistance with nonwork circumstances impacting work	Kraus et al. (2009)

poorer backgrounds are treated by others across both types of situations.

We start with a review of key microorganizational processes impacting employees' objective (socio-economic) career success identified by past research, and we then integrate this work with research, explaining how coming from a poorer background *does* impact behavior in the relevant situations. To this end, we draw on diverse literatures, organizational as well as disciplinary (see Table 1, right-hand side). We consider each specific microorganizational process impacting objective career success and then provide an overview of the findings, explaining how coming from a poorer family impacts behavior in the given situation. We summarize the state of the relevant literatures and discuss the key findings (rather than reviewing all relevant findings). We focus on the strongest predictors of objective career success, particularly if there is conclusive existing empirical work linking family background with the given factor. This strategy of integrating research on objective career success with research on how coming from a poorer background shapes own and others' behavior provides a novel conceptual lens for explaining when and why employees from poorer backgrounds would behave or be treated in ways that introduce barriers to their socioeconomic advancement and talent utilization. We focus on identifying *issues*, and in the general discussion, we discuss how the identified issues can lay an agenda for research and practice to address challenges faced by workers from poorer backgrounds.

How Coming from a Poorer Background Impacts Work Capacity

Nonwork circumstances impacting work. Perhaps, the core feature distinguishing employees presently working in a similar position but coming from poorer versus richer families is the feature of the families themselves. Families of poorer employees will, on average, tend to have fewer material resources and be more financially vulnerable (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). The lower availability of material resources of poorer families will translate into higher demands placed on the employee, ultimately amplifying the conflict between family and work domains. Following the framework by Greenhaus and Beutell (1985), conflict between family and work domains can manifest itself in terms of time (competing time demands), strain (spillover from one domain to the other), and behavior (how compatible or incompatible patterns of behavior at home are with those at work).

Various issues family members of an employee might face can be buffered through material resources. This notion is supported by research on the effect of material resources on life satisfaction (Furnham, 1998; Johnson & Krueger, 2006), which shows that "money protects people from unfortunate and unforeseen perturbations in life" (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2008: 208). Consider, *e.g.*, the case of an ailing family member. Poorer families will have fewer material resources available to deploy to cope with such an event, *e.g.*, by hiring a nurse to be at home

and take care of the ailing family member. Employees from poorer families are thus, on average, more likely to be asked to assist with nonwork issues by virtue of the fact that poorer families are less capable of addressing such issues by using financial means. This will result in a higher level of interference of family life into work life, ultimately amplifying time demands and strain of employees from poorer backgrounds.

Employees from poorer backgrounds, on average, also have more children (Jokela, Alvergne, Pollet, & Lummaa, 2011). Part of the reason is the transmission of values and dispositions across generations (Jokela et al., 2011). In addition, psychological life history research suggests that the differential reproductive strategies of people from poorer versus richer backgrounds might be in part a life-course adaptation to early childhood experiences of being raised in a resource-scarce environment (potentially remaining partly ingrained at a biological level), which shape how people make decisions under uncertainty later in life. Specifically, controlling for current socioeconomic positions, Griskevicius, Delton, Robertson, and Tybur (2010: 241) found that “For individuals growing up relatively poor, mortality cues produced a desire to reproduce sooner—to want children now, even at the cost of furthering one’s education or career. Conversely, for individuals growing up relatively wealthy, mortality cues produced a desire to delay reproduction—to further one’s education or career before starting a family.”

Regardless of the reason, people from poorer backgrounds tend to have a higher number of children irrespective of their current situation, which in itself presents a challenge in terms of time and strain. Considering how the number of children affects the gender gap helps put the role of this nonwork circumstance impacting work capacity of employees from poorer backgrounds into perspective. For example, Howell and Day (2000: 867) note as follows: “The effect of number of children is especially striking. Among those without children, the gender gap is not even significant, despite the large number of people in this category. However, when the number of children equals two, the gender gap becomes .241 ($p < .001$) on a standardized scale, and when the number of children equals four, the gender gap doubles.” Organizations worldwide are designing policies to address such issues and ensure equal opportunity and talent utilization regardless of gender, but the differences in time and strain demand that the nonwork domain introduced as a

function of coming from a poorer background has been largely overlooked by research as well as practice.

In addition to the increased time- and strain-based conflict, the kinds of behaviors an employee from a poorer background engage in at home, compared with an employee from a richer family, are less likely to be compatible with behaviors engaged in at work. With higher levels of current income and job position, employees from poorer families are less likely to have family members who are in terms of their occupation and everyday concerns similar to their own occupation and concerns. This means that the type of family obligations and even the exchange of information that occur among family members will be less synergistic with the current job demands of employees from poorer (relative to richer) backgrounds as their income and job level increase.

The key presently available evidence for the increased family interference in work in terms of time, strain, and behavior, as described here, comes from extensive qualitative research by Lubrano (2004), who conducted numerous interviews with people from poorer families working in white-collar jobs. Lubrano (2004) provides rich accounts of how the discrepancy in terms of the demands, habits, and values between the families of workers from poorer backgrounds and their white-collar jobs creates tensions that disadvantage such workers in ways that often remain invisible and underappreciated from the perspective of the organization.

The relatively stronger negative impact of nonwork circumstances on work of employees from poorer backgrounds is likely to impact hours available for work and work centrality, both of which are among the strongest predictors of objective career success (Ng et al., 2005). The greater family demands of workers from poorer backgrounds simply leave less time and other resources to be deployed for work, even if only in the form of the ability to work outside of the working hours or the ability to dedicate cognitive resources to work-related issues throughout the day (see Ten Brummelhuis & Bakker, 2012, for a review). The same tension will impact work centrality, defined as a generalized psychological ability to prioritize work over other life domains, and in itself an independent predictor of objective career success with an effect size almost half of that of total hours worked (Ng et al., 2005). Given the greater family demands of workers from poorer backgrounds, they are simply less able to set aside other life domains (e.g., in response to cases of exceptionally high work demands), which in the long run

represents a hindrance to their objective career success.

Voluntary learning. Technological advancements have been accelerating over the past centuries, as reflected, *e.g.*, in exponential increase in technological capabilities known as the “Moore’s Law.” These dramatic technological changes are transforming organizational demands in terms of strategic focus and marketing-related considerations by amplifying the need to innovate to remain competitive (Tushman, 1997). In addition, technological changes are impacting individual workers through constant transformations of the bases of effective work routines of virtually all jobs. For example, an administrative assistant who is more proficient in terms of latest information technology utilization will be able to get more work done, ultimately translating into better career prospects through direct or indirect linkages between performance differences and employee rewards (Aral, Brynjolfsson, & Wu, 2012). An assistant professor who learns how to perform statistical analyses by using code rather than a point-and-click interface will produce work more quickly and in a manner that is less error prone (and thus of a higher quality). As such, it is unsurprising that factors promoting human capital development represent among the key predictors of objective career success (Ng et al., 2005).

By voluntary skill development, we refer to several specific behaviors discussed in the literature. What all of these behaviors have in common is that they are self-directed in nature and oriented toward changing the self, while varying in the source of information the change is based on as well as the duration needed to implement the self-change. The individual form of voluntary skill development is to use the available information (*e.g.*, available on the internet) to improve the efficiency of one’s work routines, but one can also approach other people (whether in the organization or outside of it), asking for information on how to perform better, *e.g.*, in the form of seeking feedback on one’s current performance (Ashford, Blatt, & Walle, 2003) or directly inquiring about effective work practices (Morrison, 1993). With respect to duration, voluntary skill development can range from being relatively immediate to forms involving long-term planning and execution. The latter seems particularly important, seeing how planning has been identified as an independent predictor of objective career success (Ng et al., 2005).

Differences in life circumstances faced by employees coming from poorer versus richer backgrounds impact the propensity for skill acquisition

in several ways. Meuris and Leana (2015) discuss how workers in low-income jobs might have fewer opportunities for self-improvement and skill acquisition, as well as how their greater financial concerns (relative to workers in higher income jobs), might distract them from engaging in learning-oriented behaviors. However, beyond the evident structural limitations to learning introduced by working in different kinds of jobs, we believe that there is reason to believe (based on the evidence we review in the following paragraph) that even employees working in *similar* positions and receiving *similar* income will vary in the extent to which they engage in voluntary skill learning, depending on their family background. If this is the case, then even when workers are provided with similar job opportunities and resources (*e.g.*, through adequate educational policies), the lower tendency to engage in voluntary skill learning over the course of employees’ life span might represent a barrier to objective career success of workers coming from poorer backgrounds.

Our argument is based on several streams of evidence on residual psychological effects of being born into a poorer family. First, there is extensive work in sociology documenting differences in values children in poorer versus richer families are socialized into, such that lower income families are less likely to emphasize self-direction and instead emphasize accepting and conforming with the status quo (Kohn, Naoi, Schoenbach, Schooler, & Slomczynski, 1990; Kohn & Schooler, 1969; Kohn, Slomczynski, & Schoenbach, 1986). Recent work in social psychology replicated these findings and showed that these socialization differences remain evident later in life, most notably in institutes of higher learning (see Stephens et al., 2014, for a review). This is particularly problematic from the perspective of modern organizations, which are increasingly reliant on employee self-direction to achieve their goals (Frese, 1997; Grant & Ashford, 2008), including ensuring continuous work skill improvements. Institutes of higher learning are institutions explicitly focused on skill acquisition and provide much structure for people working toward these goals. Voluntary skill learning at work, by contrast, is much less structured and more reliant on self-direction, and as such it will be more undermined than structured learning in educational institutions by lower propensity for self-direction among employees brought up in poorer families.

Voluntary skill acquisition is particularly relevant in job types marked by higher levels of complexity and sophistication. As such, it perhaps does not

come as a surprise that the lower returns on the same type of education for people coming from poorer families noted earlier is *amplified* at the highest levels of education (Torche, 2011). People with advanced degrees are more likely to enter the kinds of careers in which self-directed voluntary skill acquisition remains an important precursor of human capital and thus objective career success, and it is precisely in this domain that the lower self-direction of people from poorer families starts producing the greatest divergence in terms of career outcomes arising as a function of family background.

In addition to sociological research on socialization, psychological research guided by the life history theory points to other reasons why employees from poorer families would be less likely to engage in voluntary skill learning behavior. This line of work investigates the role of early childhood experiences in how people cope with uncertain situations later in life. Most workplace situations affording the opportunity for voluntary skill learning are characterized by some uncertainty in the sense that the employee has an option (not a mandate) to rely either on a familiar but less efficient course of action or invest in improving one's skill, which might not only generate higher efficiency in the future but also require more effort in the present. One of the core findings emerging from life history research is that coming from a poorer family prepares the brain for unpredictability later in life, resulting in better attention to threats but a weaker future-focus and ability to inhibit dominant responses, a propensity which defines voluntary work skill learning (for reviews of this body of work, see Frankenhuis, Panchanathan, & Nettle, 2016; Giudice, Gangestad, & Kaplan, 2015). It is important to note that this effect emerges controlling for person's current SES, which suggests that poorer childhood environments create a lasting impact on psychology irrespective of one's current situation (Griskevicius et al., 2013; Griskevicius, Tybur, Delton, & Robertson, 2011; Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014; Mittal, Griskevicius, Simpson, Sung, & Young, 2015).

We do not mean to suggest that employees from poorer families cannot learn—we are optimistic that, through a combination of self-discipline and targeted organizational support policies, these issues can be successfully managed. However, to ultimately do so, it is important to increase awareness of the fact that existing research does suggest that employees from poorer backgrounds might face greater challenges engaging in self-starting behaviors aimed at self-improvement, such as voluntary learning and

career planning behaviors, which are increasingly required by organizations and represent an important pathway to socioeconomic mobility.

Political skill. Political skill is another domain of work capacity that represents a major precursor to employee effectiveness and objective career success, and, for which, there is evidence that it is impacted by employees' socioeconomic background. Here, we jointly discuss constructs commonly labeled as political knowledge (awareness of social relationships in the organization and influence different organizational actors have) as well as social capital construction (the ability to build relationships with individuals within the organization). Combined, these two factors represent the strongest predictors of objective career success. For example, the average correlation between political knowledge and salary is as large as the correlation between education level and salary, whereas the correlation between social capital and promotion is *three times* as large as the correlation between education and promotion (Ng et al., 2005). Our comparison with education is meant to reinforce the point that whereas social planners promote socioeconomic mobility through the provision of educational opportunities for people from poorer backgrounds, organizational actors can perhaps contribute even more by focusing on within-organizational pathways that undermine talent utilization of workers from poorer families.

Belmi and Laurin (2016) investigated how coming from poorer backgrounds is related to attitudes toward political behavior and propensity to be political at work. Political behavior (*e.g.*, thinking about and treating social interactions strategically) can have negative social connotations, and Casciaro, Gino, and Kouchaki (2014) even find that instrumentally approaching relationships makes people feel dirty. Belmi and Laurin (2016) drew on research showing that poorer communities tend to emphasize communal orientation and discourage self-interest more than do richer ones (Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012), which builds off the sociological research cited earlier, showing that poorer families emphasize getting along rather than being self-directed (Kohn et al., 1986; Kohn & Schooler, 1969). Based on this background, Belmi and Laurin (2016) predicted and found that people from lower income families are more averse to politics and political behavior, because of its association with self-interest.

Belmi and Laurin (2016) also studied MBA students at an elite west-coast university and found that

the students' self-reported childhood income (e.g., measured by such items as "Growing up, I felt relatively wealthy compared with the other kids in my school," and "My family was in a much more privileged position compared with the other families in my neighborhood") predicted interest in only one elective—"The Paths to Power"—but not any other electives (e.g., "The Quest for Happiness" and "Advanced Topics in Teams"). In fact, the correlation between whether MBA students came from richer (relative to poorer) backgrounds and interest in learning political skill was very strong, ranging from .65 to .74, depending on covariate inclusion. The context strongly resembles that from a study by Pfeffer (1977b) cited earlier, which found that graduates from elite west-coast MBA programs coming from poorer backgrounds end up with lower salaries 10 years after graduation, despite no discrimination in terms of salary at the time of hiring. Given that political skill is as large of a predictor of salary as is entire educational attainment, the findings that coming from a poorer family is associated with aversion to politics help understand why employees from poorer families, and even those provided with elite educational opportunities, are not able to realize the same socioeconomic attainment as their peers from richer families. The authors do identify a silver lining: reframing power through a communal lens seems to attenuate the effect. Nevertheless, it is disconcerting that, on average, coming from a poorer background is associated with negative attitudes toward and lower proclivity for politics, given the paramount role of this factor in objective career success.

In addition, research on social networks provides another piece of puzzle that helps understand why employees from poorer backgrounds would be held back by poorer political skills. Smith, Menon, and Thompson (2012) found that workers from poorer backgrounds cognitively activate (focus on) smaller and tighter subsections of their social networks, when prompted to think about addressing challenges to their jobs, presumably due to their learned stronger orientation on close others (as opposed to more distant others, who would represent useful "weak ties"). This finding dovetails with research by Oishi and Kesebir (2012), who found using a computer simulation that for people in economically challenging conditions, focusing on smaller and deeper friendships tends to be the most opportune networking strategy, and, in a follow-up study, the authors found that real-world social networks tend to conform with this model. Specifically, Oishi and

Kesebir (2012) found that people living in zip codes with lower median family incomes were happier if they had a "narrow but deep social network, whereas in other socioeconomic conditions, people were generally happier if they had a broad but shallow networking strategy" (p. 1542).

Together, these articles suggest that poorer environments tend to socialize people into focusing on narrow networks, and that this tendency is carried over and shapes people's behaviors once they become working adults. As demonstrated by Oishi and Kesebir (2012), this tendency can be functional among poorer communities, but when carried over into modern organizations, it can introduce barriers to how effectively people from poorer backgrounds are able to get things done in organizations (Thompson, 2005), and, ultimately, the extent to which they are able to progress in their career (Ng et al., 2005). This is unfortunate as some recent research suggests that those employees from poorer backgrounds who do attain leadership positions might have some advantages in terms of managing others, one of them being lower narcissism (Martin, Côté, & Woodruff, 2016) and another a superior ability to read others' emotions (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010). Again, we are optimistic that with the right combination of organizational interventions and employee adoption of useful social strategies, employees from poorer backgrounds can catch up and excel in terms of political skill. However, given the tremendous importance of political skill as a predictor of employee success, and clear evidence from different domains that coming from a poorer background makes it more challenging to develop this aspect of work capacity, it is important to increase awareness of this issue and start developing and testing interventions within organizations.

How Coming from a Poorer Background Impacts Work Style

Personal initiative. As noted earlier, modern organizations are increasingly reliant on change and innovation. This fact not only necessitates that employees continually invest in developing their own work skills, as described earlier, but also generates the need for employees to become agents of change of the organization itself, *i.e.*, to "exert control and influence by acting as sculptors of their environments" (Grant & Ashford, 2008: 7). Given the level of their work capacity, employee work style can be marked by different levels of the tendency to actively engage with and try to influence their environment. For

example, some employees will constructively propose improvements in the work routines of their teams and the broader organization, whereas others will refrain from engaging in such initiatives even when they do have good ideas. Here, we refer to such employee behavior as personal initiative in line with Frese and Fay (2001), as research under this label traditionally focused on positive, pro-organizational actions that help organizational performance (as opposed, *e.g.*, to initiatives that benefit the self or initiatives that harm the organization; Grant & Ashford, 2008).

Given its general utility to the organization (Detert, Burris, Harrison, & Martin, 2013; Edmondson, Bohmer, & Pisano, 2001; MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Podsakoff, 2011), employee personal initiative tends to be associated with positive consequences for employees, provided the initiative does not take a destructive or overly negative form (Burris, 2012; Chamberlin, Newton, & Lepine, 2017). As such, several individual difference constructs underlying personal initiative, including proactive personality and internal locus of control (Frese & Fay, 2001), have been found to be positive predictors of objective career success (Ng et al., 2005).

Given this, the emphasis on conformity in poorer families documented in sociological research described earlier (Kohn et al., 1986; Kohn et al., 1990; Kohn & Schooler, 1969) will represent a hindrance to talent utilization and success of employees from poorer backgrounds by way of reduced personal initiative at work. Stephens et al. (2014) discuss how socialization in poorer families fostering greater conformity and respect for authority ultimately translates into different conceptions of the self, reducing the propensity to express oneself and influence the situation around oneself among students from poorer backgrounds. Stephens et al. (2014) discuss issues that such a disposition causes in institutes of higher education, but, in our view, organizations represent an even more relevant and problematic domain in terms of impediments to socioeconomic mobility of people from poorer backgrounds introduced through a lower personal initiative. Successful participation in higher education might certainly be helped by the tendency to influence one's environment, but bottom-up change initiatives tend to be much less essential (or at least less explicitly rewarded) in educational institutions than in business organizations. As such, most of the harm to socioeconomic mobility due to the lower propensity for influencing one's environment among people from poorer backgrounds might be generated

in the workplace rather than in the educational system.

Another domain of findings that is relevant to why employees from poorer backgrounds would display lower personal initiative at work is evidence that lower-SES individuals have a lower generalized sense of perceived control over outcomes in the world (*i.e.*, lower internal locus of control). Most people have a naive theory regarding the extent to which they are able to influence or control outcomes in the world through their own actions, as opposed to outcomes being influenced by external influences such as chance (Rotter, 1966). There is robust evidence that a lower socioeconomic status is associated with a reduced generalized sense of control (Grossmann & Varnum, 2010; Kluegel & Smith, 1986; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009; Lachman & Weaver, 1998). It is theoretically possible for people coming from poorer families to somewhat revise this belief as they advance in life and progress socioeconomically, but longitudinal research suggests that this happens surprisingly rarely and that there is an extraordinary stability in locus of control. Cobb-Clark and Schurer (2013: 358) summarize their research on the topic as follows: "We find that short- and medium-run changes in locus of control are rather modest on average, are concentrated among the young or very old, do not appear to be related to the demographic, labor market, and health events that individuals experience, and are unlikely to be economically meaningful." Thus, being brought up in a poorer family is associated with a lower generalized sense of control among employees later in life. Also suggestive is the research based on evolutionary life history theory cited earlier, which has demonstrated that in conditions of uncertainty, generalized sense of control decreases further among people from poor (but not affluent) families (Mittal & Griskevicius, 2014).

The lower generalized sense of control among employees coming from poorer backgrounds represents an impediment to personal initiative because one fundamental determinant of whether or not employees initiate change is their belief regarding whether the initiative would ultimately have an impact on the organization (Avery & Quiñones, 2002; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010). Managers or peers frequently fail to act on initiatives (Fast, Burris, & Bartel, 2014), and if an employee does not believe that his or her initiative would have an impact on practices and procedures in the organization, the employee will see little reason to engage in such behavior (Ashford, Rothbard, Piderit, & Dutton, 1998). Across specific

organizational situations affording an opportunity for personal initiative, the lower generalized sense of control among employees from poorer backgrounds should make them less likely to predict or assume that their initiative would have an impact.

The principle of category-driven social cognition identified in psychology (Baldwin, 1992; Fiske, 1992; Lord, 1982; Niedenthal, Cantor, & Kihlstrom, 1985; Trzebinski, 1985) suggests that when there is some ambiguity as to the extent to which an individual is able to influence outcomes in the world, the individual will be guided in his or her inferential process both by the information contained in the particular situation (*e.g.*, confidence in the specifics of the idea for the initiative) and by his or her generalized construal of relevant situations (*e.g.*, the belief about whether one can influence the state of affairs in the world more generally). Employees from poorer background, because of their lower generalized sense of control, are thus, on average, less likely to assume that their initiative would translate into a change in the organization, thus undermining the motivation to engage in the prospective personal initiative (Avery & Quiñones, 2002; Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2012; Venkataramani & Tangirala, 2010). Taken together, this review of evidence suggests several reasons why employees from poorer backgrounds would exhibit lower personal initiative, thus limiting their contributions to the organizations and undermining their career success.

Positive outlook. Personality research suggests that two additional factors tremendously important for how employee approach their work (and ultimately perform)—low neuroticism (emotional stability) and self-esteem—are less characteristic of employees born into poorer families, irrespective of their current situation. Together, these traits form part of what Judge and Bono (2001) refer to as core self-evaluations, reflecting how positively individuals tend to view themselves and their abilities, and we refer to them as a positive outlook in terms of work style. Whether an individual has such a positive outlook shapes approach to work in a range of situations. For example, employees who have a more positive outlook set more ambitious goals, display higher levels of motivation, and ultimately perform better (Erez & Judge, 2001). Employees with a more positive outlook are also less focused on and bothered by various stressors at work (Kammeyer-Mueller, Judge, & Scott, 2009), and even manage their family–work conflict more effectively (Boyar & Mosley, 2007). These positive approaches to work situations ultimately translate into not only better

performance but also higher job satisfaction (see Judge & Bono, 2001, for a meta-analysis).

The meta-analysis of objective career success by Ng et al. (2005) focuses on one underlying dimension, neuroticism, finding it to be the strongest predictor of socioeconomic advancement among the “Big 5” personality characteristics. An additional demonstration of the importance of a positive outlook for objective career success comes from an analysis of longitudinal data by Judge and Hurst (2008: 849), who find that “higher core self-evaluations were associated with both higher initial levels of work success and steeper work success trajectories.” This means that given the same educational level and starting position, those with a more positive outlook attain higher ultimate objective career success. As such, a less positive outlook arguably constitutes one reason why even when provided with the same level of education and job opportunities, the ultimate socioeconomic attainment of workers from poorer backgrounds is limited.

Research in psychology suggests that coming from a poorer background will cause higher chronic levels of neuroticism (lower emotional stability) as well as lower chronic levels of self-esteem. With respect to neuroticism, Ayoub, Gosling, Potter, Shanahan, and Roberts (2018) analyzed a very large cross-country dataset ($N = 2,280,027$) to estimate the effect of parental socioeconomic status on personality. The authors focused on adults in their working years (30–80 years old) and were able to control for the education and current social class of the respondent, thereby isolating the effect of being brought up in a higher versus lower-SES home. They found that being brought in a lower-SES home significantly adversely impacted emotional stability (*i.e.*, resulted in higher levels of neuroticism later in life), although the effect size was small. Interestingly, these results paralleled those obtained from a meta-analysis of numerous past studies on the influence of parental SES on neuroticism and in which current situation was not controlled for (Ayoub et al., 2018). This might suggest that being brought up in a poorer home somewhat increases neuroticism in a way that is relatively stable and not substantively impacted by changing circumstances later in life.

With respect to self-esteem, Orth (2018) analyzed a large dataset spanning from birth to the age of 27 years, finding that coming from a poorer family is associated with a lower long-term self-esteem, and specifically that “the effects of home environment, presence of father, and poverty are enduring, as indicated by a nonzero asymptote in the time course of

effects from age 8 to 27 years” (p. 637). Thus, whereas more studies are needed within organizational contexts, extant research strongly suggests that being born into a lower income family leaves a permanent psychological mark in the form of a less positive outlook, which can in turn impede talent utilization and mobility of workers from poorer backgrounds.

Openness to experience. The final difference in work style that can be impacted by employee background we discuss concerns openness to experience, defined as the tendency to seek out new experiences, be curious and imaginative, and be willing to entertain new ideas (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Costa & McCrae, 1992). Ng et al. (2005) find this trait alone to be a significant positive predictor of salary as well as the subjective experience of and satisfaction with one’s career (see also Eby et al., 2003). Openness to experience as a characteristic of work style might be increasingly important for socioeconomic mobility, given the shift toward innovation, flexibility, and creativity, and the automation of routine work. This characteristic is important for performance of some higher level functions, such as creative work (Shalley, Zhou, & Oldham, 2004) and knowledge sharing in teams (Matzler, Renzl, Müller, Herting, & Mooradian, 2008), particularly in teams consisting of diverse members (Homan, Hollenbeck, Humphrey, Knippenberg, Ilgen, & Van Kleef, 2008). To attain socioeconomic mobility, workers from poorer backgrounds need to be able to perform well in such roles that will increasingly characterize high-level work of the future.

People open to experience are also more willing to emigrate (Canache, Hayes, Mondak, & Wals, 2013), and Ng et al. (2005) show that willingness to transfer as well as international experience are independent and, on average, quite substantial positive predictors of objective career success. Given the increasingly unstructured and global nature of work, such flexibility is important to ensure career success and thus socioeconomic mobility. Employees high in openness to experience are better at adapting to new tasks (LePine, Colquitt, & Erez, 2000), and thus better prepared for the increasingly unpredictable work demands. In line with our reasoning, Eby et al. (2003: 691) similarly argue that with “the reality of less stable employment and the need to constantly be on the lookout for ways to build new skill sets, it is expected that openness to experience will be important in predicting success in the boundaryless career.” Finally, employees high in openness to experience tend to perform better in company-organized

training programs (Barrick & Mount, 1991), which is particularly relevant for employees from poorer backgrounds, given the concerns related to voluntary skill learning reviewed earlier.

A study by Jonassaint, Siegler, Barefoot, Edwards, and Williams (2011) finds that coming from a lower socioeconomic background (proxied by educational attainment of either parents) is associated with lower levels of openness to experience, and the correlation with family background is stronger than the correlation between current income and openness to experience, suggesting that socialization has a notable effect on this trait, irrespective of the current situation. Data from large longitudinal studies such as “Midlife in the United States” and “Wisconsin Longitudinal Study” similarly suggest important influences of family background on openness to experience, with documented implication for life outcomes in domains (such as reproductive timing) that potentially also impact socioeconomic mobility of people from poorer backgrounds through more indirect pathways than those brought about by how people act at work (see our earlier discussion of how non-work circumstances impact work capacity of employees from poorer families). For example, Jokela et al. (2011: 495) find that “Approximately half of the negative association between openness to experience and number of children in women was accounted for by socioeconomic background.”

The most extensive evidence for the relationship between coming from a poorer family and openness to experience comes from research by Ayoub et al. (2018) described earlier. In their summary of a meta-analysis of past studies on parental income and personality (not controlling for participants’ current situation), the authors note that the “largest effect size we found was between pSES and openness to experience ($r = .14$)” (p. 341; pSES stands for parental SES). The follow-up analysis of the large-scale dataset of more than two million people, in which education and current social class of the respondent were controlled for, found substantively the same effect, with “the largest correlation once again being with openness to experience ($r = .12$)” (p. 343). A comparable effect of family background irrespective of whether current situation is controlled for might again suggest that being brought up in a poorer home undermines openness to experience in a way that is relatively stable and not substantively impacted by changing circumstances later in life, which can ultimately represent an impediment for employees from poorer backgrounds working in modern organizations.

How Coming from a Poorer Background Impacts Third-Party Opportunity Provision

Next, we review research on how other organizational actors might treat workers coming from poorer backgrounds in ways that may hinder their talent utilization and mobility. One assumption here is that observers are, in some way, able to identify whether the person is coming from a poorer or richer family. We reviewed evidence relevant to this assumption elsewhere (Pitesa et al., 2017), finding that “because SES is such a strong basis of division in society, dividing people in terms of where they live, what they wear, how they are educated, how they talk, who they know, and even what their names are, it is likely that across workplaces, people do readily form impressions of their coworkers’ SES, both past and current” (p. 88). Our review in the following text is focused on situations in which this conclusion holds—*i.e.*, when others learn (*e.g.*, through self-disclosure or by hearing from others) or can infer (*e.g.*, from one’s name, patterns of speech, or observed differences in life circumstances) the socioeconomic background of the target.

We started the current review by noting that with the rise of humanism, the ability of those born into poorer families to work their way up became one of the central social values. Why then, would third-party organizational actors act in ways that lead to the opposite outcome? Clearly, many if not most people would prefer for people from poorer backgrounds to have an opportunity to work their way up to socioeconomic mobility and in the process contribute to the success of modern organizations. The organizational context, however, introduces additional motives that can ultimately lead people to behave in ways that hamper that goal. In line with economics research on discrimination (Becker, 1957; Phelps, 1972), these can be classified as either 1) concerns about the competence or ability of employees from poorer background, resulting in “statistical discrimination,” or 2) preference for not working with employees from poorer background (even when one might have no concerns about their work ability), resulting in “taste-based discrimination.” As we explain in the following text, sociological and psychological research elaborate on specific reasons underlying these two motives, in turn explaining how they shape third-party treatment in a range of consequential organizational situations and hinder objective career success and effective talent utilization of workers from poorer families.

Selection decisions. The precondition to achieving socioeconomic mobility through work in organizations is securing a job in the organization, *i.e.*, being successful in the organizational selection process. As such, selection decisions are exceptionally consequential for objective career success (Boudreau, Boswell, & Judge, 2001; Gatewood, Feild, & Barrick, 2008). The key current evidence on discrimination based on people’s socioeconomic background comes from research in sociology. Most notably, Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) conducted a study in which they sent applicant resumes to large law firms and recorded callback rates. Each resume was identical, except for differences in stated candidate gender and a set of cues, suggesting that the candidate is coming from a poorer versus richer background. The way in which the latter factor was manipulated reflects the rich set of cues people may use within organizations to gauge whether a worker is coming from a richer versus a poorer background. For example, the authors varied candidate last names (Cabot versus Clark), extracurricular activity (sailing versus track and field), expressed interest in other sports (polo versus pick-up-soccer), and musical interest (classical music versus country music). The fact that the reader probably does not require an explanation for which cue belonged to which condition is a testament to the fact that people readily make inferences concerning different family histories based on cues available in everyday organizational life.

The authors sent resumes containing this manipulation to 316 law firms (one to each firm) and found that signals that the candidate came from a poorer background significantly undermined callbacks—only six callbacks for such fictitious candidates were received, compared with 16 for their otherwise identical counterparts fortunate to be born into richer families. Interestingly, the effect emerged despite the fact that in the condition meant to create the impression that the candidate came from a poorer background, the authors also highlighted that the applicant was a recipient of financial aid. Although this clearly signaled a poorer background, given that financial aid is usually tied to merit, it may have potentially also served as a cue of competence. Although the final number of callbacks was rather small, these results were statistically significant and provide a demonstration that barriers to mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer families in modern organizations can in some industries start at the very entrance to the organization.

From the perspective of organizations, these candidates had otherwise identical qualifications, so the unwillingness to tap into talent of those coming from poorer families also clearly represents a loss of efficiency for organizations. In fact, Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) show in a follow-up study that the different candidates were stereotyped as similarly competent, suggesting taste-based rather than statistical discrimination. The authors find that impressions in terms of whether the candidate “would get along with corporate clients and executives” (p. 1113) seem to be driving the lower opportunity provision to people from poorer backgrounds. Decision-makers seem to be taking into account preferences for working with similar others (their own and those of the people in the firm), and given that organizations such as law firms tend to be dominated by people from higher social strata, this mechanism ultimately introduces barriers to entry for similarly qualified workers from poorer backgrounds.

Sociological research is traditionally focused on culture as the key variable of interest; so in this and other similar studies, the focus is on isolating the role of similarity in cultural tastes among candidates and decision-makers (see also Rivera, 2012). It is possible that in certain cases, coming from a poorer background is associated with no hindrance whatsoever in terms of work capacity or work style, and this seems to be the type of situations studied in sociology (Rivera, 2012; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Such situations represent easy cases where prejudice (taste-based discrimination) of decision-makers needs to be regulated (*e.g.*, by concealing all indication of candidates’ socioeconomic background). However, the reality is that, in some cases, coming from a poorer family, even after receiving equal education, can be associated with somewhat lower expected employee performance. In fact, the wide range of evidence on how coming from a poorer background is associated with different aspects of work capacity and different work styles reviewed thus far might suggest this to be the case quite often.

We believe that the more difficult case and a notable dilemma for organizations and societies is that, in many cases, coming from a poorer background will be correlated with expected job performance. For example, some decision-makers in a law firm might expect candidates from poorer backgrounds to have larger families and greater family demands, be less future oriented, have less developed political skill, display lower personal initiative, have a less positive outlook, or be less open to experience. Their inferences would be informed by average estimates

from much empirical research, which we reviewed previously. To the extent that coming from a poorer background is on average negatively associated with work-relevant abilities or styles, decision-makers might discriminate based on not only taste but also anticipated performance (*i.e.*, they might engage in statistical discrimination).

Much more research is needed to examine the role of statistical discrimination in barriers to the entry of employees from poorer backgrounds, but our ongoing fieldwork in the United States, the United Kingdom, and India suggests that despite the motive to help people from poorer backgrounds, statistical discrimination plays a major role in selection. If so, regulating processes pertaining to cultural fit (or preference-based discrimination more generally) will not suffice to achieve equality of opportunity for people from poorer backgrounds and ensure they reach their full potential. Instead, more involved and targeted mechanisms, from quotas to training programs, will be needed to ensure similar performance expectations, irrespective of family background.

This dilemma parallels the one the societies and organizations went through or are going through with regard to women, debating how to ensure equality of opportunity if there are real gender differences in work competence and work style (which might be due to social or historical reasons, such as differential responsibility for childcare, and not reflecting anything innate). Ultimately, the society might be comfortable with some short-term loss in economic productivity to ensure equality of opportunity and help people reach their full potential in the long run. In many countries, policymakers and organizational decision-makers are thoroughly restructuring organizations to achieve this goal in relation to women, whereas similar arrangements in relation to people from poorer backgrounds are rare. We believe this will be one of the key upcoming challenges for scholars and decision-makers alike, and a major opportunity for societal efforts to promote socioeconomic mobility.

Performance evaluations. Despite no evidence of overall impressions of competence in the specific setting examined by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016), people in general do hold strong negative stereotypes of competence of people of lower socioeconomic status. Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, and Xu (2002) found that poorer people are stereotyped as low in competence, and Koch, Imhoff, Dotsch, Unkelbach, and Alves (2016) even found that the first factor emerging in spontaneous impression formation is “Agency/Socioeconomic Success” (p. 675), suggesting that

people associate socioeconomic success and competence so strongly that the impressions of the two are empirically indistinguishable. We review past research suggesting that these stereotypes can bias evaluations of performance even when socioeconomic background is clearly unrelated to performance. We classify this issue in the opportunity provision category as performance evaluations form the basis for compensating, promoting, and retaining employees in the vast majority of organizations (Gerhart & Fang, 2014), so systematically negatively biased performance evaluations might undermine the opportunity of workers from poorer backgrounds to work their way up.

The initial study relevant to our argument comes from Darley and Gross (1983: 20), who found in an experiment that “Although the videotaped performance series was identical for all subjects, those who had information that the child came from a high socioeconomic background rated her abilities well above grade level, whereas those for whom the child was identified as coming from a lower class background rated her abilities as below grade level. Both groups cited evidence from the ability test to support their conflicting conclusions,” whereas, importantly, “Nothing in the socioeconomic data conveyed information directly relevant to the child’s ability level.” Thus, it seems that the negative stereotypes of competence of those coming from a poorer background not only bias perceivers’ judgments of actual performance episodes but are also supported by a process of confirmatory evidence search. The same biased evaluation of people depending on their background has been found in the context of evaluations of an identical performance episodes delivered through an audio channel alone. Ryan and Sebastian (1980) as well as Giles and Sassoon (1983) found that people evaluate a speaker behind the same prerecorded statement as less competent when the person is said to be from a poorer background.

A study by Baron, Albright, and Malloy (1995) suggests how these processes can impact performance evaluations in organizational contexts. They found the negative biasing effect of a poorer background to be the strongest when the objective performance level is average or when it is ambiguous. This finding dovetails with research by Pfeffer (1977b: 553), which found that “In a study of graduates from one school of business, it was found that the effect of socioeconomic origins on salary was greater in (a) staff rather than in line positions, (b) in smaller organizations, and (c) in organizations

operating in finance, insurance, banking, or real estate, as opposed to manufacturing. These results are consistent with the hypothesis that *the use of ascriptive characteristics will increase to the extent performance is difficult to evaluate*” (emphasis added).

Therefore, the negative association between a poorer background and competence can undermine performance evaluations, ultimately harming workers from poorer families, and this effect is particularly likely in domains in which performance is harder to evaluate (e.g., research rather than manufacturing). Performance becomes more complex and difficult to evaluate with increased job complexity and at higher levels of skill. For example, a lack of results of a real estate agent trying to sell property might be due to his or her somewhat lower competence or a host of contextual factors, such as chance, whereas a lack of results of a manufacturing team working on an otherwise well-functioning assembly line is much more unambiguously attributable to their competence. Thus, the burden of being born into a poor family (with respect to other biased evaluations of performance) might worsen in higher level jobs, which offer the highest promise of socioeconomic mobility.

Mentoring. In addition to whether workers are given an opportunity as employees of an organization, and whether their contributions are evaluated (and rewarded) adequately, perhaps the strongest factor in how others influence an employee’s success in the organization is by providing opportunities for mentoring and sponsorship from organizational incumbents. These typically include senior, experienced, and influential organizational actors. Ng et al. (2005) find that the correlation between this factor and objective career success is almost as large as that of the number of hours worked, which would typically be thought of as the core contribution employee makes to an organization. This tends to be the case because mentors act as coaches (aiding skill development), counselors (providing guidance and support with socioemotional issues), and also active champions, intervening to secure exposure and opportunities within the organization for their protégés (Allen, Eby, Chao, & Bauer, 2017; Kram, 1985). A failure to secure a mentor can thus be a major impediment to one’s career.

The most obvious challenge to obtaining a mentor for employees from poorer backgrounds is that in many cases, mentorship relationships develop informally and that people tend to associate more fluently with those who are more (versus less) similar to

them (Byrne, 1971; McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001), corresponding to a taste-based discrimination. This issue has been identified as an impediment to the development of professional networks among women (Ibarra, 1993), and the research by Rivera and Tilcsik (2016) described earlier illustrates how this mechanism would also influence mentorship development as a function of a fit in employees' and prospective mentors' family background (see also Côté, Kraus, Carpenter, Piff, Beermann, & Keltner, 2017). The fact that people from poorer backgrounds face challenges in terms of socioeconomic attainment at the same time means that most powerful organizational actors will tend to come from wealthier rather than poorer backgrounds (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Hout, 1988), undermining the chances that employees from poorer background receive informal mentorship opportunities.

The most relevant study on organizational mentoring opportunities as a function of employee family background has been conducted by Whitely, Dougherty, and Dreher (1991). The authors surveyed managers early in their career and found, as expected, that mentorship was positively associated with objective career success. The authors were able to control for education and job type, and have examined how family background, *i.e.*, coming from a richer versus a poorer family, is associated with mentorship by higher-ups in the organization. Employee family background was measured using a 6-point continuous measure, ranging from the family being below the poverty line or working poor (the bottom two categories) to the family having an income at least twice of the national average or coming from elite backgrounds, with income coming primarily from inherited assets (the top two categories). There was a difference, albeit small, in the amount of mentorship received as a function of employee background, although inferences are hard to draw, given that the family background measure was dichotomized and that the article did not distinguish between informally developed mentorship from formally assigned mentorship (as the latter would override any taste-based discrimination in selection of mentees).

More importantly, Whitely et al. (1991) found that the *consequences* of mentorship for objective career success differed drastically as a function of workers' background. Controlling for a range of variables, they found that mentorship was a very strong predictor of objective career success, but only among employees coming from richer families. For this group, the

regression model predicting promotions found that the standardized regression coefficient for mentorship was twice as large as that of having a MBA degree (versus bachelor) as well as twice as large as that for years of work experience. However, among workers from poorer backgrounds, mentorship produced no statistically significant benefits in terms of promotion. Again, it is worth highlighting that participants' education and job type were controlled for, so these estimates represent a good approximation of within-organizational dynamics arising as a consequence of coming from a poorer family alone. It seems that even when workers do receive mentorship, it occurs in such a way that puts employees from poorer backgrounds at a disadvantage.

Whitely et al. (1991) did not test specific reasons for the lower returns on mentorship because of an employees' poorer family background, but the taste-based discrimination mechanism might suggest that the effort that mentors (generally from richer backgrounds) invest in mentees from poorer backgrounds is lower than the effort they invest in mentees from richer backgrounds, simply because of greater liking of and interaction fluency with those similar to the self (Byrne, 1971; McPherson et al., 2001). However, it is also possible that the negative competence stereotypes people have of those coming from poorer families, which we reviewed previously, somewhat demotivate and dissuade prospective mentors. Mentors generally want their mentees to be successful because in many ways, a successful mentee represents a positive legacy and a point of pride for the mentor, whereas an unsuccessful mentee represents a potential threat to one's competence as perceived by one's peers (consider the fact that many professors put placement success of their students on their own resumes).

Thus, the negative competence stereotypes (whether accurate or inaccurate) of coming from a poor background might represent another pathway through which mentorship opportunity and effectiveness are undermined among workers from poorer families, in addition to taste-based discrimination. More research is needed to directly investigate this possibility, but the broader point is that, as in the case of selection, solutions focusing on taste-based discrimination alone might not suffice, and in many cases, prospective mentors and organizations will need to tackle the difficult question of whether and how to provide opportunities to those who might objectively have somewhat lower expected work performance due to the specific circumstances introduced by their family background.

How Coming from a Poorer Background Impacts Third-Party Assistance Provision

Assistance with socialization. In addition to mentorship, the second major form in which employees are supported by their organization concerns socialization (Allen et al., 2017), defined as “the process by which a new member learns the value system, the norms, and the required behavior patterns of the society, organization, or group which he is entering” (Schein, 1968: 3). Socialization is thus different from mentorship as it represents not a particular potential opportunity for an employee, but tends to occur, in different forms, for each employee, and involves learning about the broader organizational system that one is becoming a part of. It is also different from provision of direct help with a particular problem one might encounter when executing everyday tasks as it focuses more generally on learning about and adapting to the broader system of organizational routines, structures, and culture. Schein (1968) calls socialization the price of membership in a particular organization, as opposed to merely knowing how to perform a certain work routine. Together with mentorship, socialization constitutes a key form in which an organization can support and sponsor an employee, and, as such, successful socialization presents an important predictor of objective career success (Allen et al., 2017; Ng et al., 2005).

The key issue with socialization of employees from poorer backgrounds is that modern organizations, and modern institutions more broadly, tend to be setup in ways that favor people from families in which experience with institutions themselves tends to be more abundant. Two central insights from the socialization literature are relevant to this point. First, going back to Van Maanen and Schein (1977), a large body of research shows that organizations vary widely in terms of whether they provide structured, comprehensive, and formal programs through which they adjust newcomers to the organization. Many organizations provide no programs of the sort at all, and a sense of overwhelming “shock” tends to be common among newcomers as they try to learn how to navigate the new environment (Louis, 1980). Second, and relatedly, numerous studies show that how well people perform after they join the organization depends largely on themselves (Allen et al., 2017 provide a recent overview of the entire literature and cite more specific reviews). Individuals with better information, expectations, and habits tend to adjust more effectively and perform better.

This is relevant because one notable conclusion emerging from research in sociology is that such a lack of assistance with socialization and reliance on newcomers’ own initiative disadvantages those coming from poorer families. Most notably, Lareau (2015) conducted a qualitative study over the period of 20 years, summarizing the findings as follows: “cultural knowledge matters when white and African American young adults of differing class backgrounds navigate key institutions. I find that middle-class young adults had more knowledge than their working-class or poor counterparts of the “rules of the game” regarding how institutions worked. [...] When faced with a problem related to an institution, middle-class young adults frequently succeeded in getting their needs accommodated by the institution; working-class and poor young adults were less knowledgeable about and more frustrated by bureaucracies.”

The issue identified by Lareau (2015) represents a simple mechanism explaining why organizational socialization systems would disadvantage workers coming from poorer backgrounds. Because of their specific life courses, such workers are less likely to possess the knowledge, expectations, and habits required to successfully navigate modern organizations. For example, workers from poorer families are less likely to have grown up learning from their parents how to successfully navigate modern organizational systems (given that their parents are less likely to have had such jobs). The common failure of organizations to comprehensively and formally introduce their workers to the overarching institution, and the complexities of life within it, thus disproportionately disadvantages workers from poorer backgrounds. Extensive future research is needed on how best employees from poorer backgrounds can be successfully adjusted as newcomers, and the ultimate implementation of this knowledge should generate tremendous gains for organizations in terms of the utilization of talent of the entirety of its workforce.

Assistance with work skill development. Beyond assistance with adjustment to the institution more broadly, employees are often in need of assistance with the execution of everyday work tasks. In such situations, coworkers often respond to the need for assistance by engaging in helping behavior, defined as voluntary acts aimed at assisting coworkers attain their work goals in a way that is not contractually enforced by the organization (Organ, 1988). For example, coworkers may help an employee who does not know how to perform a certain operation on the

computer or may help handling an emergency with a customer. We have little reason to believe that employees would be unwilling to help their colleagues coming from poorer families. Some people might want to purposefully perpetuate disadvantage of workers coming from poorer families, and research on social dominance orientation provides empirical demonstrations that such motives and such people do exist (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), but the presently dominant social ideology is generally favorable toward socioeconomically disadvantaged individuals, and research shows that people generally try to be considerate when interacting with individuals from poorer backgrounds (Van Doesum, Tybur, & Van Lange, 2017).

There is evidence, however, that employees from poorer backgrounds will, on average, receive a different *kind* of help. Nadler and Chernyak-Hai (2014) distinguished between autonomy-inducing helping, and helping that allows the help recipient to learn how to solve the problem on his or her own in the future (*i.e.*, providing instructions for solving the problem) from dependency-inducing helping, and helping that keeps the help recipient unable to solve the problem in the future (*i.e.*, the problem is solved for the help recipient but without providing instructions for solving the problem). In terms of the examples provided earlier, when an employee does not know how to perform a certain function on the computer, a coworker can simply take the computer and execute the given function, thereby solving the problem at hand and allowing the help recipient to continue working on other tasks. Alternatively, the helpful coworker can take the time to teach the help recipient how to perform the given function, thereby increasing the skillset of the help recipient and allowing the help recipient to solve similar problems autonomously in the future. Such skill transfer through autonomy-oriented helping is arguably one of the key ways in which employees can amplify their coworkers' productivity and human capital, which in turn shapes long-term objective career prospects.

A series of studies by Nadler and Chernyak-Hai (2014) finds that a poorer (versus richer) background of a person in need of assistance makes help givers more likely to opt for dependency-inducing instead of autonomy-inducing helping. Recall the negative stereotypical association people have between lower-SES backgrounds and competence reviewed earlier. Given this background, Nadler and Chernyak-Hai (2014) predicted that "low-status help

seekers would be viewed as chronically dependent and their need as due to lack of ability, leading to the giving of dependency-oriented help (*i.e.*, full solution to the problem). High-status help seekers were expected to be viewed as competent and their request as representing their high motivation to overcome a transient difficulty, resulting in autonomy-oriented help (*i.e.*, tools to solve the problem)." The authors find support for this effect, even in situations in which there was no reason to believe that the manipulated socioeconomic status of the person seeking assistance was associated with competence or motivation.

For example, in one experiment by Nadler and Chernyak-Hai (2014), "participants were exposed to information about the problem solver, who was said to be a 24-year-old male living with his parents and two siblings in either a very high socioeconomic status (SES) residential area (Savion) or a very low SES residential area (Hatikva). In fact, these neighborhoods are emblematic in Israeli society of very rich and very poor populations, respectively" (p. 62). Participants were ostensibly randomly put in the role of "guides" of a worker solving different mathematical problems, and received the correct answers to these problems and ways to arrive at them. The problem solver ostensibly found it challenging to solve two of the problems, and asked for assistance, at which point the participants indicated whether they would help, and, if so, whether they would "prefer giving the answer to the problem or an explanation of the way such problems can be solved" (p. 61). In line with our earlier arguments, there were no differences in rates of helping as a function of whether the help recipient came from a poorer or richer background. However, the vast majority (88 percent) of participants chose dependency-inducing help when the problem solver was said to be from a poorer background, whereas the vast majority (76 percent) of participants chose autonomy-inducing help when the problem solver was said to be from a richer background. The results further showed that participants attributed the need for assistance of the person from a poorer background to lack of motivation and lack of ability, whereas they attributed the need for assistance of the person from a richer background to a temporary lack of concentration. Whereas more research in organizational settings is needed to fully understand implications of negative stereotypes of people from poorer backgrounds for coworker helping, these findings suggest that everyday helping interactions among coworkers may diss.

Assistance with nonwork circumstances impacting work. We conclude our review of key areas in which organizational actors might treat employees coming from poorer backgrounds in ways that may hinder their talent utilization and mobility by focusing on how they respond to what we highlighted as the key distinguishing feature of workers from poorer versus richer families—differences in the families themselves. We argued and reviewed some suggestive evidence that workers from poorer families experience higher family demands, ultimately amplifying the conflict between family and work domains. We conclude with a review of evidence for why managers would not be sensitive to such challenges faced by workers from poorer backgrounds and would instead attribute the associated work-related issues as signs of incompetence, ultimately undermining performance evaluations and success of employees from poorer families.

As noted earlier, most powerful organizational actors will tend to come from wealthier rather than poorer backgrounds (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Hout, 1988). Two streams of research suggest that this fact in itself will make managers less likely to be attuned and sensitive to subordinates' life circumstances potentially impacting their work. First, social projection theory suggests that people anchor on their personal situation when thinking about others (Cronbach, 1955; Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). When imagining others' circumstances, people start from accessible self-knowledge and then adjust, generally insufficiently (Krueger, Acevedo, & Robbins, 2006). For example, research found that when trying to assess how other people feel, people's inferences are impacted by their own feelings (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2003). Similarly, in perceiving how extreme others are in their political attitudes (Van Boven, Judd, & Sherman, 2012), people tend to be biased in assuming similarity with how extreme their own attitudes are.

Given that supervisors generally come from richer backgrounds and as such will personally experience fewer of the issues in terms of balancing work and family lives that workers coming from a poorer background experience, supervisors might simply not be very mindful of the fact that employees from poorer backgrounds face a more challenging situation than their colleagues from richer backgrounds. This simple mechanism would lead supervisors to underappreciate the role of different life circumstances in generating potential differences in employee workplace behaviors. For example, if an employee from a poorer family is unable to stay late

or come on the weekend, the supervisor might infer lower commitment rather than fully appreciating that the employee might be experiencing higher levels of work–life conflict relative to other workers. Even if the employee cites family reasons, supervisors might not respond well to such an account, given that a similar excuse might be offered by an employee unwilling to stay longer or come on the weekend because of lack of commitment (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992; Weiner, Figueroa-Munioz, & Kakihara, 1991). Given the (generally not unreasonable) suspicion that an employee might prefer not to work on the weekend and that this might motivate the justification, managers might not fully appreciate the differences in life circumstances of poorer versus richer employees, particularly given their own lack of experience with life situations faced by workers from poorer backgrounds (and the resulting anchoring on their own situation when thinking about others). Finally, the research on help seeking described previously suggests that, for an employee coming from a poorer background, asking for understanding with work-related issues can be a perilous feat as it might just reinforce negative stereotypical attributions of low competence and motivation.

In addition to producing differences in life experiences and the resulting difficulty of appreciating the challenges workers from poorer families face, coming from a richer background (which is typical for managers) also impacts the likelihood of taking into account contextual factors more generally. Relevant to the Indian context we mentioned earlier, Mahalingam (2007) asked participants how a child's future behavior would be impacted if a child from an upper caste background was adopted by a lower caste family and *vice versa*. He found that Brahmin participants (those coming from upper caste, generally richer backgrounds) believed that the child would behave in line with the norms of the caste the child was born into, whereas the Dalits (those from a disadvantaged caste category) believed that the child would behave in line with the norms of the caste one is socialized into. Thus, people from advantaged backgrounds tended to discount the role of the context.

This finding might in part reflect self-serving reasoning, as historically those belonging to advantaged classes often believed themselves to be genetically superior. However, other research suggests that the tendency to disregard situational influences is typical of individuals from higher socioeconomic backgrounds because of more fundamental

psychological processes and absent of any self-serving reasoning. Most notably, Kraus et al. (2009) found that the sense of control (which we mentioned earlier tends to be chronically higher among those coming from richer backgrounds, irrespective of the current situation) leads people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to attribute causes of both positive and negative events (e.g., “Having low income,” “Receiving proper healthcare,” and “Failing a class at school”) to individuals and underappreciate contextual influences. These findings dovetail with research on social projection reviewed previously, as they suggest that because those from richer backgrounds feel less personally constrained by the context, they assume this to be the case for other people as well.

Taken together, these streams of research suggest that one of the core challenges employees from poorer backgrounds face at work—their greater nonwork demands—will be underappreciated by those in higher levels of the organizational hierarchy. A review by Kossek and Lautsch (2018) is also suggestive of this possibility. The authors examine how work flexibility differs between different occupations, concluding that “Providing employee control over scheduling variation (flextime) may benefit lower level workers the most, yet many are unable to access this flexibility form.” To the extent that the lack of flexibility in lower level jobs is not entirely driven by efficiency concerns, the lack of assistance with nonwork issues in relation to lower income workers might be partly driven by managers’ lack of appreciation of these workers’ life circumstances, which will adversely impact employees born into poorer families even when working in the *same* jobs as employees from richer families.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

A New Direction for Organizational Scholarship

Our integrative review of research on objective career success and consequences of being born into a poorer family points to a series of within-organizational processes relevant to socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization of employees from poorer backgrounds. Perhaps the key contribution of our review is to highlight the importance of within-organizational dynamics in the socioeconomic mobility of people coming from poorer backgrounds. Some of the data from macro-level perspectives we cite at the outset of the article, showing that, given the

same educational attainment and even same job opportunities, coming from a poorer background presents a burden in terms of career success, have been available for decades. Until now, they have not motivated systematic research of micro-level organizational pathways causing these issues, and the corresponding organizational and social change. Such disconnect between macro and micro levels of analyses is something that is often lamented but rarely tackled (Bamberger, 2008). This issue is particularly salient in relation to socioeconomic disadvantage, which have been conceptualized at the macro level through the lens of inequality, mobility, and stratification, with poorly integrated scaffolding at the micro level. Baron and Pfeffer (1994) note that “missing in most of the literature on reward distributions is any attention to the ‘micro-macro’ connections—between social structures, institutions, and organizations, and, cognitions, perceptions, interests, and behaviors at the individual or small-group level.” Through a thorough consideration of how different micro-level forces occurring within organizations contribute to the disadvantage of employees from poorer backgrounds documented at the macro level, our work helps create an important bridge between micro and macro levels of analyses, and sets the stage for organizational scientists to more effectively address broader issues of mobility and stratification.

Motivated by suggestive evidence that workers from poorer backgrounds face issues within organizations, our key goal was to bring this fact to the attention of micro-level organizational scientists and provide an initial review of research pointing to key within-organizational processes causing the problem. As we detail in the following text, our grounding in the micro-level literature on objective career success can serve as a blueprint for future organizational scholarship on the topic, which we believe needs to increase greatly in terms of volume. This focus of our review also means that our emphasis was on issues, rather than on potential solutions. One reason is that, at present, there would not be much research to review on micro-level organizational processes and managerial techniques that *alleviate* issues workers from poorer backgrounds face. This fact is consistent with our key claim that scientists, societies, and organizations have not been sufficiently invested in understanding and managing within-organizational dynamics impacting socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer backgrounds. We hope that our review will help improve that situation.

In the following section, we consider how current and future organizational scholarship on within-organizational dynamics impacting mobility of workers from poorer backgrounds relates to several relevant literatures, most notably disciplinary work on power and status and organizational research on diversity and disadvantage experienced by other social groups. The aim of this discussion was to further elucidate how organizational scholars can make contributions beyond existing literatures. Against this backdrop, in the final section, we propose an agenda for future organizational research on socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer backgrounds. We discuss specific directions, opportunities, and challenges for future research aimed at understanding within-organizational issues faced by such workers, as well as research aimed at developing solutions.

Contributions Beyond Existing Models of Disadvantage

Contributions beyond disciplinary research on disadvantage and mobility. Our focus on specific organizational processes and a firm grounding in the literature on objective career success moves the state of the field forward in terms of both a deeper understanding of concrete issues within organizations and what organizations can do about them. Some of the processes we review have been mentioned in disciplinary research on stratification, most notably psychologically rooted (Magee & Galinsky, 2008; Piff et al., 2018) and sociologically rooted (Correll, Ridgeway, Zuckerman, Jank, Jordan-Bloch, & Nakagawa, 2017) research on status and power. The literature on the psychology of power and status is typically less problem-driven (*e.g.*, it mainly seeks to document various potential outcomes of having versus not having power), and not specifically concerned with what happens within organizations that undermines the success of employees from poorer families (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). As such, this literature often ignores various specific organizational processes that are known to impact objective socioeconomic attainment, *e.g.*, work–life conflict, which we identified as important factors in how workers from poorer backgrounds fare in organizations. In addition, the psychological literature on power is largely confined to laboratory studies because of internal validity challenges of studying consequences of power (an issue which is less relevant to studying family background, the effect of which can be more easily isolated in passive observational studies). As

such, the psychological literature on the psychology of power typically does not empirically study whether and which of its conceptual advances might help explain reproduction of disadvantage in real-world organizational settings.

On the other hand, much of the sociological literature takes a macro-level view of disadvantage and mobility, leaving unclear the pathways through which it occurs in organizations, and thus what action managers can take to address the issue. Reskin (2003: 7) notes that existing models of disadvantage and mobility “consign the processes that convert actors’ motives into more or less disparate outcomes to a black box [...] offering little guidance for modifying policies.” This is a broad characterization and there is certainly excellent work (including some reviewed here) in sociology on specific processes within organizations, disadvantaging people from poorer backgrounds. However, we believe that this literature can benefit from a cross-disciplinary integration with micro-level organizational research, which has amassed tremendous knowledge on within-organizational processes and can thus provide a great deal of precision in terms of when and which processes within organizations undermine social mobility. By focusing on specific within-organizational processes, research on socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization will also become much more understandable to managers and thus more useful to generate the desired social and organizational change.

Contributions beyond extant research on disadvantage experienced by other social groups. As mentioned before, there is extensive research on within-organizational issues faced by women, and the same is to some extent true of research on certain minorities, most notably racial minorities. The evidence we reviewed here is specific to being born into a poor family, and as such the identified issues are likely experienced by workers from poorer backgrounds, irrespective of what other social groups such workers belong to. For example, to the extent that women face greater challenges in balancing work and nonwork domains, our review suggests that those women who come from poorer backgrounds would be disadvantaged even further. But even in the case of such overlap in identified issues, the solutions might differ. For example, the best way to resolve the greater challenges women (relative to men) face in balancing their work and family lives might require a change in social roles and responsibilities of men and women. However, the greater challenges that workers from poorer families

are facing in balancing their work and family relative to their counterparts coming from richer backgrounds (e.g., fewer resources at one's family's disposal, or a higher number of children) would not be helped by such an initiative.

At the same time, some existing knowledge on how to manage disadvantage of other social groups might be applicable to managing issues faced by workers from poorer backgrounds. For example, solving the issues of biased performance evaluations, or preference for dependency-inducing (as opposed to autonomy-inducing) helping due to negative stereotypes of competence and motivation of people from poorer backgrounds, might in part leverage on existing work on biased treatment of women due to similar negative competence stereotypes. To the extent that such a knowledge transfer is possible, we believe this is extremely fortunate, but much more research is needed to flesh out such connections and test whether existing managerial strategies for minimizing issues experienced by other social groups can help in addressing challenges workers from poorer backgrounds face in modern organizations. In the next section, we outline an agenda for such research.

Agenda for Organizational Research on Socioeconomic Mobility and Talent Utilization of Workers from Poorer Backgrounds

The current review connected macro-level research on socioeconomic mobility, which pointed to an overlooked role of within-organizational dynamics in generating barriers to mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer backgrounds, with research pointing to key micro-level organizational processes generating these issues. This approach provided a theoretical grounding for understanding the role of within-organizational dynamics in socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer backgrounds. We hope that this theoretical framework will be useful to guide future empirical research aimed at understanding the issues faced by workers from poorer families and developing and testing interventions that can alleviate the problem. A substantial number of claims in our review is based on suggestive disciplinary research, so studies documenting the corresponding issues in organizational contexts are needed, and future interventions would similarly need to be focused on the context of work. We consider several factors relevant to future organizational research on the topic: Research focus determination, sampling

considerations related to selection and sorting, study design and measurement challenges, the role of micro and macro contextual factors, and the nature of future interventions.

Research focus determination. Our review focused on 12 broad factors relevant to how workers from poorer families fare in organizations. There are arguably numerous additional relevant influences, whether pertaining to workers' own behavior, others' treatment, or interactions between them. In our view, the selection of which factor or combination of factors to examine as potential within-organization barriers to mobility of workers from poorer families should be problem-driven, and thus informed by the relative importance of the given factor to socioeconomic mobility. Perhaps, one reason why we know relatively little about micro-organizational processes affecting workers from poorer backgrounds, despite sizeable bodies of micro-level research on power, status, and SES, is that these literatures are generally not problem-driven but are instead interested in a much broader range of potential outcomes than those relevant to mobility. Microorganizational research seeking to provide an explanatory scaffolding for issues of mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer backgrounds needs to be strongly problem-driven and focused on those variables that matter the most to objective career success.

Another way in which future microorganizational research can ensure relevance is to attend carefully to data pertaining to the overarching issue of class ceiling. We cited several such investigations at the outset of the article, but many more studies are needed to explore in detail where and when the class ceiling effect is more or less pronounced. Studies documenting the class ceiling in a more granular and precise manner than has been carried out to date would be helpful in pinpointing organizational conditions (e.g., job type or supervisor type) that seem most conducive to generating the class ceiling, and thus are most promising targets for research and interventions on the part of micro-organizational scientists.

In the current review, the different factors contributing to issues experienced by workers from poorer backgrounds were considered as distinct on a conceptual basis, but future research can examine several contributing factors simultaneously as well as theorize and examine interactions among them. Gauging the relative importance of a particular factor *controlling* for other factors will be important in detecting factors that are particularly relevant,

allowing organizations to concentrate intervention efforts on them and generate maximum benefit. Furthermore, some of the factors may interact in a way that creates negative spirals for workers from poorer backgrounds. For example, lower political skill (a factor pertaining to own behavior) and homophily in terms of mentorship and socializing on the part of higher-ups (a factor pertaining to others behavior) might work in tandem and generate a negative self-reinforcing spiral that results in particularly low social capital among workers from poorer backgrounds. Uncovering such potential negative spirals arising from interactions among the different individual factors might be used to develop targeted interventions that counter problems early on, potentially generating large benefits for workers and their organizations.

Sampling considerations: selection and sorting.

The key consideration for future research concerns where and when in the organizational context can microorganizational processes holding back employees from poorer backgrounds be expected to occur. Such processes represent a within-job phenomenon: For example, two interns working in the same position in the same law firm might have different levels of political skill and receive different amounts of mentorship, depending on their socioeconomic background. These processes should generate differences in socioeconomic success (perpetuating the disadvantage of the worker from a poorer family) down the line, *e.g.*, through quicker salary increase and promotion rates of the worker from a wealthier family. Similarly, workers from poorer families might have a harder difficult time adjusting, developing connections, and managing family–work interface, early in their career. Such issues generate the class ceiling effect (*i.e.*, undermine objective career success of workers from poorer backgrounds) down the line. Thus, to detect the within-organizational issues underlying the class ceiling effect, studies should focus on early stages of employees' careers and examine how within-context (*e.g.*, within the same job, or controlling for job type) variation in family background is related to relevant employee outcomes.

Studies are less likely to detect the relevant issues among older workers because of selection effects. To the extent that workers from poorer families face issues that hold them back, over time, we would expect only those workers from poorer backgrounds who either do not experience such issues, or have found ways to cope with them, to have reached the same position as workers from wealthier families. Thus,

examining how family background relates to challenges among older workers who have attained similar job positions might lead to the conclusion that coming from a poorer family is not an impediment to work success. Studies should thus either focus on early-career workers, ideally those who just completed their education and are embarking on careers in organizations or should account for tenure as a moderator of issues faced by workers from poorer families, to address the likely selection effects. Organizational research on newcomers provides one model for this strategy, as it not only focuses on junior employees but also has determined specific time periods needed for an employee to adjust to a new workplace, develop connections to organizational incumbents, and start performing at a high level. Such information is useful for pinpointing when one would expect different issues workers from poorer families might face in organizations to become apparent.

Therefore, perhaps the key empirical strategy for future research on within-organizational dynamics impacting socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization of workers from poorer backgrounds should include field studies among junior employees with similar educational backgrounds, keeping the organizational and job context constant. For example, one might survey early-career employees working in the same organization and performing the same kind of work.

Alternatively, if one's research question necessitates a greater diversity in terms of contexts from which participants are drawn (*e.g.*, to examine effects of between-organizational differences in diversity policies), researchers might want to focus on workers within a given income range and working in similar positions. The challenge with using such an approach is sorting, *i.e.*, the possibility that differences in family backgrounds might be correlated with differences in the position one is presently occupying because of self-selection during job search and job choice, as well as discrimination in the process of recruitment.

The problem of sorting is particularly salient in choice of profession. For example, Laurison and Friedman (2016) find that workers from poorer backgrounds have a harder time penetrating some professions than others. Specifically, the authors “find a distinction between traditional professions, such as law, medicine, and finance, which are dominated by the children of higher managers and professionals, and more technical occupations, such as engineering and IT, that recruit more widely”

(p. 668). As a hypothetical extreme case, if one looked at a profession from which workers from poorer families sort themselves out aggressively, one might find primarily outliers from poorer backgrounds who, in terms of their preferences, work capacity, work styles, and treatment received by others, are on average much more similar to workers from wealthier backgrounds than workers from poorer backgrounds. In this case, one might also conclude that differences in family background do not matter for workplace success and mobility. Despite such sorting dynamics, Laurison and Friedman (2016) do find that coming from a poorer family remains a significant impediment in terms of long-term career prospects even among workers from poorer backgrounds who manage to enter professions traditionally reserved for and dominated by workers from richer backgrounds. Nevertheless, future organizational studies can gain precision by anticipating sorting effects and accounting for differential relevance of within-organizational dynamics impacting success of workers from poorer families across different types of jobs, organizations, and professions.

In addition to anticipating and accounting for such sorting processes when studying within-organizational dynamics impacting employee mobility, future work should try to understand reasons why workers from poorer families might sort themselves out of certain jobs and professions. Research on underrepresentation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) professions might provide a model for this research direction. This line of work is dedicated to explaining why women select themselves out of STEM careers (Ceci & Williams, 2011; Ceci, Williams, & Barnett, 2009). The underrepresentation of women in such careers is seen as unfair and researchers and policymakers are trying to uncover and counter processes contributing to the problem (Moss-Racusin et al., 2018; Stout, Dasgupta, Hunsinger, & McManus, 2011). In a similar vein, future research is needed to understand factors driving underrepresentation of workers from poorer backgrounds in certain jobs, types of organizations, and professions. Once such micro-level processes underlying sorting are understood, researchers will be able to develop and test interventions that can truly equalize opportunities irrespective of one's family background.

Study design and measurement. Another challenge future organizational field studies need to overcome concerns the difficulty of empirically pinpointing the source of issues in employees' own behavior versus how employees are treated by

others. We considered different sources of issues as distinct on a conceptual basis, but making such a distinction empirically in field studies might not be as straightforward. For example, conducting a survey among newcomers from diverse family backgrounds on family-work interference might result in the finding that employees from poorer families report a higher level of conflict between family and work domains. Yet, this finding could be explained by differences in family properties (e.g., objectively higher family demands), employee perceptual tendencies (e.g., due to higher neuroticism), or co-worker treatment (e.g., lower support for family demands in relation to workers from poorer backgrounds). Each of these possibilities points to a different set of potential solutions. Thus, future organizational studies should use designs that are able to determine the true source of issues faced by workers from poorer backgrounds. For example, this could be achieved by comprehensively operationalizing and testing different potential sources of issues. In the aforementioned example, this would mean measuring whether objective family properties, such as number of children, versus individual dispositions, such as employee neuroticism, predict experience of family-work conflict. In addition, field studies should examine multiple perspectives (e.g., obtaining coworker reports in addition to focal employee reports) to distinguish relative importance of focal employee's dispositions and perceptions versus objectively occurring dynamics within organizations.

In addition to such challenges associated with measuring mediating mechanisms and outcomes, future organizational research on workers from poorer backgrounds will face the challenge of how to measure family background reliably and precisely. Most people do not recall what exactly their family was making when they were young, or what the net worth of their household was. Various measures have been developed trying to assess family background. Some measures, such as the Family Affluence Scale by World Health Organization (Boyce, Torsheim, Currie, & Zambon, 2006), ask about participants' family property (e.g., whether the family owns a car and multiple bedrooms) and consumption patterns (e.g., the ability to go on a vacation). Others, such as self-report measures used in life history research (Griskevicius et al., 2011) ask for a holistic subjective self-assessment of family wealth when one was growing up. Clearly, both approaches are limited and our experience is that the correlation between different proxies of family background

tends to be so low that it is unlikely that they reliably tap into the same underlying construct. Given this situation, researchers need to select the most appropriate operationalizations of employee family background on a theoretical basis. Studies show that subjective impressions of one's social standing oftentimes are stronger predictors of different outcomes (e.g., subjective well-being) than are objective indicators (Anderson, Kraus, Galinsky, & Keltner, 2012). However, societies are arguably more interested in promoting socioeconomic mobility for those who are objectively disadvantaged rather than those who merely feel that way, so selecting reliable objective measures of family background represents one notable challenge for future organizational research on the topic. Strong scale development studies will be essential to the advancement of the field.

Contextual factors and evaluation of public policy impact on within-organizational processes.

Another important direction for future work is to examine the role of the broader context in which organizations are embedded, which may shape within-organizational dynamics relevant to mobility of workers from poorer backgrounds. Most studies reviewed here have been conducted in the United States, and the studies that used data collected across countries, such as research on family background and personality (Ayoub et al., 2018), have not systematically theorized or examined country differences in the role of family background. The focus on the United States, and the limitations such a focus creates in terms of the understanding of social phenomena, has recently garnered attention as a problem of modern social science more generally (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). We believe that this issue imposes a particular limitation on the understanding of workers from poorer backgrounds, given that issues such workers face are mostly shaped by idiosyncratic features of the local social and economic environment. There are no inherent differences between people born into poorer families and those born into richer families, so contexts that fully equalize opportunities for worker development and performance could in theory be completely free of issues discussed here. As such, attending to contextual differences, such as the dominant ideologies of particular societies or features of the country-level economic systems, can inform decision-makers involved in structuring these environments and designing policies aimed at promoting mobility and talent utilization.

Various differences between contexts in which organizations are embedded could be relevant to

within-organizational dynamics impacting workers from poorer families. For example, Farah and Hook (2017) show that higher levels of trust in the local community buffer against negative consequences of resource scarcity on future-focus and temporal discounting. In a similar vein, a stronger social safety net in a given country might buffer against the negative effect of being born into a poorer family on neuroticism and self-esteem later in life, by reducing environmental uncertainty and the stigma associated with a lack of financial resources.

Systematically examining how such features of the local ecology impact within-organization dynamics would help bridge disciplinary boundaries (e.g., between sociological research on neighborhood effects and microorganizational research on workplace interactions) to further the shared goal of promoting socioeconomic mobility. For that reason, we believe that expanding the focus of micro-level organizational behavior research to include local ecology in which organizations are embedded represents a very promising avenue for future research. Examining how features of the local ecology such as community trust and social safety net impact within-organizational dynamics also represents a new way of thinking about public policy evaluation. Most attempts to examine the impact of public policy measures (e.g., investment in neighborhood infrastructure) are limited to measures of direct implications (e.g., local levels of crime, life satisfaction, or community trust) but ignore a potential spillover of such policies into organizations and, ultimately, downstream implications for organizational effectiveness and employee mobility.

In addition, country-specific historical legacy related to social stratification is likely to shape how coming from a poorer family impacts third-party perception and treatment. In some countries, such as India, a lack of opportunities for people born into disadvantaged families has historically been supported by the overarching ideological structure, whereas other countries, such as the United States, at least nominally promoted socioeconomic mobility irrespective of whether one is born into a poorer or richer family (with women and racial minorities only gradually receiving similar opportunities). Issues faced by workers from poorer families reviewed here are likely to be starker in countries in which historically the dominant ideology put less emphasis on socioeconomic mobility—although there is the possibility that mistaken belief in social mobility (c.f., Davidai & Gilovich, 2018) might cause psychological distress to poor people who do not advance.

Unfortunately, as we noted earlier, at present, there is insufficient research conducted outside of the United States.

Interventions. The key benefit of organizational research that detects central issues people from poorer backgrounds face within organizations is that it could point to ways of implementing organizational and social change needed to maximize equality of opportunity and talent utilization. This will require an iterative process of designing interventions based on scientifically identified issues, implementing such interventions through collaboration with relevant stakeholders, scientifically testing the effectiveness of interventions and identifying those that produce the greater benefit at the lowest cost, and disseminating knowledge regarding the relevant solutions through academic publications and public discourse. Current decision-makers shaping organizational and public policies, as well as future ones (*e.g.*, MBA students), receive a great deal of information concerning challenges faced by some disadvantaged groups (*e.g.*, women) and solutions that are effective at addressing such issues, but there is virtually no discussion on similar topics regarding employees coming from poorer backgrounds. Much more organizational scholarship is needed to change this situation and make future generations of organizational leaders more sensitive and effective at ensuring mobility and talent utilization of workers from all backgrounds.

A range of issues identified in the current review will require structural social and organizational change. For example, the greater challenges in balancing work and nonwork domains experienced by worker from poorer families will require organizations and societies to invest in policies and programs that help alleviate such issues, as there is no way in which employees can eliminate such challenges on their own (they can only do their best to cope with them). Education will be a particularly relevant domain for implementing such programs. As elaborated earlier, at present, research and practice are heavily invested in ensuring that people from poorer backgrounds succeed in the educational system. Less attention is paid to whether the education system itself is structured in a way that ensures the success of such students once they leave the educational system and enter organizational systems. This is unsurprising, given the lack of systematic focus on how employees from poorer backgrounds fare in organizations. However, many of the issues identified in the current review could be addressed through careful changes to the educational system.

Many of the systematic differences in work capacity and work style arising as a function of family background could be addressed through training. For example, students from poorer backgrounds could receive additional training concerning political dynamics, importance of personal initiative, or openness to experience.

Such training programs could also be designed and implemented by organizations, which can take an active role in ensuring all their employees have capabilities and work tendencies that are aligned with organizational needs and important to employee advancement. When organizational decision-makers are presented with sufficient evidence that workers from poorer backgrounds face specific predictable challenges that undermine their productivity, this will motivate organizational initiatives aimed at addressing such challenges as such initiatives would be aligned with the goal of organizational effectiveness and talent utilization. Organizational scientists will be crucial in translating knowledge about challenges faced by workers from poorer backgrounds into organizational programs addressing the issues, empirically evaluating their effectiveness, and then further disseminating knowledge concerning the effectiveness of such programs to motivate their adoption by organizations worldwide.

Interventions, research, and public discussion will also be essential in addressing not only issues associated with workers from poorer backgrounds but also third-party views and treatment of such workers. Training programs for managers that make them sensitive to challenges faced by workers from poorer backgrounds might be helpful. Workers themselves can also be better prepared for the structural and interpersonal challenges they face through psychological interventions. For example, Stephens, Hamedani, and Destin (2014) showed that informing first-generation college students about challenges experienced by those who were previously in their situation helped students' cope with challenges more effectively. Similar psychological interventions are gaining popularity (Walton & Wilson, 2018) and can certainly be a part of the solution for the issues identified here. That said, it is important for all relevant stakeholders to remain involved in designing and implementing relevant solutions rather than expecting workers from poorer backgrounds to find ways to cope with the issues on their own.

Solutions to detected issues workers from poorer backgrounds face would be particularly effective if they manage to interfere with several issues

simultaneously and create positive self-reinforcing spirals that alleviate issues experienced by workers from poorer backgrounds. For example, one could develop a psychological intervention to boost levels of personal initiative as well as political savvy. The two are often needed jointly in the workplace, from proactive information gathering among newcomers to effective communication regarding areas for improvement in the organization. Organizational scientists could develop out-of-the box solutions to bundles of issues pertaining to own (e.g., psychological interventions) as well as third-party actions (e.g., organizational policies that remove most common invisible barriers to productivity and well-being of workers from poorer backgrounds). If such bundled solutions can be made cost-effective, easy to implement, and scalable, they offer the promise of promoting mobility and talent utilization on a large scale.

CONCLUSION

Our review suggests that despite many attempts at giving the same education and job opportunities to people born into poorer families, processes occurring within organizations undermine socioeconomic mobility and talent utilization of employees from poorer backgrounds. We believe this fact has been underappreciated by organizational scientists, managers, and the society more broadly. We have argued that micro-level organizational scientists are the most relevant and best equipped group of scholars for furthering our understanding of the issues workers born into poorer families face within organizations. We aimed to provide a blueprint for future organizational research through an integration of the organizational literature pointing to key within-organizational processes impacting objective (socioeconomic) success with research on how people from poorer backgrounds behave or are treated by others in the relevant situations. We hope that our review motivates more research on the topic, and by making extant knowledge more accessible serves as a springboard to organizational scientists involved in addressing this key organizational and social challenge.

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