

The Class Ceiling in the United States: Class-Origin Pay Penalties in Higher Professional and Managerial Occupations

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Abstract

Gender and racial pay penalties are well-known: women (of all races) and people of color (of all genders) earn less, on average, even when they gain access to occupations historically reserved for white men. Studies of social mobility show that people from working-class backgrounds in the US have also been excluded from top professional and managerial occupations. But do working-class-origin people who attain top US jobs face a class-origin pay penalty? Despite evidence of class-origin pay gaps in higher professional and managerial occupations elsewhere, we might expect that the central role of race and racism in US stratification processes, along with the relatively low salience of class identities, would render class origins irrelevant to earnings in exclusive occupations, at least within racial groups. Using the Panel Study of Income Dynamics to link childhood class position to adult occupation and earnings, we describe the racial and class-origin composition of different high-status occupations and the earnings of people within them. We show that when people who are from working-class backgrounds are upwardly mobile into high-status occupations, they earn almost \$20,000 per year less, on average, than individuals who are themselves from privileged backgrounds. The difference is partly explained by the upwardly mobile being less likely to have college degrees, but it remains substantial (around \$11,700) even after accounting for education, race and other important predictors of earnings. The gap is largest among white people; there is a class-origin penalty in top US occupations that is distinct from the racial pay gap.

Introduction

A long history of sociological and related scholarship has established that class origins predict educational opportunities and outcomes from elementary school through college, and that parents' class position also—largely but not entirely through education—affects both the occupations people enter as adults (see Hout 2015 for an overview) and their earnings (Thompson 2019; Torche 2011). Social scientists have also demonstrated pervasive racial and gender pay gaps, even among people with similar qualifications in similar positions. Here the metaphor of the glass ceiling has been usefully deployed to highlight the durable yet often invisible barriers that women and people of color face in achieving the same rewards as white men in similar positions (Collins 1997; Kanter 1993; Lacy 2007; Wingfield 2009; Woodson 2015; Yavorsky et al. 2019). Scholars of class and mobility, however, have generally been less concerned with whether and how class origin matters for earnings *within* broad class destinations.

The question of whether there are class-origin pay gaps along the same lines as racial and gender pay gaps has only begun to be addressed, and has not been studied at all in the United States. Recently a number of studies in Europe have shown that the resources that flow from class origin often affect occupational trajectories well beyond occupational entry. Research in a range of national contexts has demonstrated that even when those from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering elite occupations they go on to receive significantly lower incomes than their privileged colleagues (Falcon and Bataille 2018; Friedman and Laurison 2019; Hällsten 2013; Hansen 2001; Laurison and Friedman 2016; Mastekaasa 2011; Toft and Friedman 2020).

In the United States, however, there are at least three good reasons to think that class origin might not matter much for earnings within a professional or managerial class destination. First, class is widely held to be less socially salient in the United States. Americans categorize one another into gender and racial groups immediately, consistently, and non-consciously (e.g. Stangor et al. 1992). Class origin, on the other hand, is not a characteristic that people necessarily use to categorize one another in the US; in fact, most people tend to think of themselves as normal, average and middle class (Evans and Kelley 2004). This downplaying of class difference may in turn mute the importance of mechanisms that have been shown to produce class-origin inequalities in workplaces in other countries, particularly embodied aspects of class-cultural division such as differences in accent, dress and taste. This is not to say that such class distinctions do not exist in the US, as Kraus et al. (2019) show in terms of the status afforded to different US accents, but more that comparative work has underlined that people in the US do not necessarily connect them to class in the same way as people in countries like the UK (see Devine 1997 and more specifically on the UK ; Donnelly, Gamsu, and Baratta 2022).

The second reason we might not expect a class-origin pay gap in the US is that higher education has consistently been shown to neutralize class-origin inequalities in the labor market (Hout 1988; Pfeffer and Hertel 2015). Most recently, the large-scale analysis of Chetty et al (2017) found that children from low and high-income families have similar earnings outcomes conditional

on the college they attend. US higher education, on this reading, acts as “the great equalizer” and eliminates potential class-origin pay gaps.

The final reason to think there might not be a class pay gap in the US is that historical and ongoing racism and white supremacy in the United States might mean that race simply trumps class origins in predicting earnings. Class position and economic inequality are inextricably tied to racial inequality and racism in the United States; there is a long history of white racial identity being used to pre-empt cross-racial working-class identity, and of racism being used to obscure class status (Branch and Jackson 2020; Du Bois 1934; Metzl 2019; Roediger 1999). It would be reasonable to think, then, that class origin might not matter above and beyond racial group in predicting who earns more or less in a given occupational class category.

On the other hand, there are also good reasons to think careers in the US *will* be shaped by people’s class histories. There is an extensive, mostly qualitative, literature probing the “long shadow” that class origin casts across people’s experiences of, and success in, an array of educational settings, from elementary school (Calarco 2018; Lareau 2011) through high school (Khan 2010), college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2015; Jack 2016; Richards 2020) and then further in shaping patterns of occupational *access* (e.g. Hout 1988; Rivera 2012). There is less work on how and whether class origin continues to matter later in adulthood, but Lareau’s follow-ups with her initial participants (2015) and Streib’s book on cross-class marriages (2015) both show that even in the United States, even (in the case of Streib’s book) when looking only at white people, class origin is meaningful and consequential well into adulthood.

However, there is a striking absence of recent research taking this further to examine whether “class-origin pay gaps” also exist within big-class destinations in the US. We do not know much about whether and to what extent class origins predict adults’ success once they have begun careers in high-status occupations.

In this paper we address these questions by using the last four available waves (2013-2019) of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (Brady and Kohler 2019; Survey Research Center 2020) to look at earnings by class origin among those in US higher professional and managerial occupations. We find a substantial class-origin pay gap; those from working-class backgrounds have predicted annual earnings nearly \$20,000 less than those from privileged backgrounds, and \$11,700 less even when they are otherwise similar in terms of educational attainment, individual occupation, hours worked, firm size and level of experience. This analysis demonstrates that class origin, together with race/ethnicity and gender, affects earnings well beyond occupational entry. People’s class roots do not cease to matter even when they are working in elite occupations.

Class, Race, and Earnings

Sociological analyses of class mobility have consistently found that unequal opportunity chances exist in all modern societies. Most of these studies take a fairly fixed approach to measurement—comparing the absolute or relative rates of mobility between origin (usually measured in terms of parental occupation) and destination (measured in terms of one’s own

occupation) in a symmetrical analysis, at various levels and types of aggregation (Hout 2015; Song et al. 2022; Weeden et al. 2007; Weeden and Grusky 2005). Economists generally favor similarly symmetrical analyses of income or earnings, most often focusing on parent-child income elasticities (Blanden 2013). Other work looks at how occupations mediate wage inequality by occupational or income-group origin (Fang and Tilcsik 2022).

A growing body of literature has begun to highlight the limitations of these approaches (Hällsten 2013; Hansen 1996; Laurison and Friedman 2016). This research shows how conventional approaches to mobility tend to overlook the extent to which class origin continues to shape outcomes throughout the lifecourse. By limiting our understanding of class destinations to simply who *enters* occupations, standard analyses often miss important distinctions within occupations. A number of recent studies have demonstrated that, in Europe and Australia, even when those from working-class backgrounds are successful in entering a range of elite occupations they go on to receive significantly lower incomes than their privileged colleagues. Such a class-origin pay gap has now been documented in a range of national contexts, including Britain, France, Norway, Sweden, Spain, and Australia (Bernardi and Gil-Hernández 2021; Falcon and Bataille 2018; Hällsten 2013; Hansen 2001; Laurison and Friedman 2016; Mastekaasa 2011). While a few of these studies attribute this inequality to specific differences in educational attainment, most find that class pay gaps remain substantial even after adjusting for class-origin differences in education, demographics, work location, occupational sorting, and/or supposedly “meritocratic” measures of “human capital” such as experience, training, and hours worked. Notably, some studies also find a distinct “double disadvantage” in earnings for women from working-class backgrounds in elite occupations. This connects to a wider qualitative literature demonstrating that upward mobility into elite professions is often a more difficult experience for women (hooks 1993; Lawler 1999; Loveday 2016) and that women from working-class backgrounds are more likely to conceal their background in elite work settings and feel less comfortable displaying embodied markers of their class-origin (Friedman 2022b).

These studies not only demonstrate how standard approaches to mobility tend to obscure the long-lasting importance of class origin, but they also reveal a powerful and largely ignored aspect of earnings inequality. Indeed class-origin pay gaps within occupational groups imply profound inequities in life chances, and possibly also class discrimination in the workplace. They may also point to “class ceiling” effects in elite occupations. For example, Friedman and Laurison (2019) find patterns of horizontal and particularly vertical segregation (by class background) within their case studies of a large multinational accountancy firm, a national UK television broadcaster, and most recently the entire UK Civil Service (Friedman 2022a). Similarly, Toft (2019) shows that the socially mobile in Norway tend to have much less stable careers when they reach the highest rungs of the occupational hierarchy, arriving later than their privileged colleagues and being less likely to “stay up.”

One notably underexplored national context in this emerging literature on class pay gaps and ceilings is the US. This is particularly surprising considering Torche’s (2011) influential work found a significant within-occupation earnings gap by social background among highly-educated “professionals” and went on to call specifically for further interrogation of such “ascriptive sources

of labour market inequality.” However, we know of no US study that has subsequently taken up this call to look at how class origin shapes earnings in high-status occupations.¹

One potential reason for this absence is that, as suggested in the introduction, there are several streams of literature that indicate class origin might matter less for earnings in US high-status occupations. The first of these is that class may simply be a less important stratifying force in the US than in other countries. Where the UK, for example, has a government commission on social class mobility, and class origin has been widely integrated into corporate diversity and inclusion agendas, political and legal systems in the US rarely if ever consider social class as a meaningful characteristic. As DiMaggio (2012:16) points out, class is “far less institutionalized in the United States than are gender and race.” Americans also tend to see themselves as normal and average, rather than marked by distinct class identities, and are more likely than those in many countries to identify as “middle class,” regardless of their “objective” class origin and destination (Evans and Kelley 2004; Hout 2008; Jackman 1979; Sosnaud, Brady, and Frenk 2013), and they consistently underestimate the importance of class in determining life outcomes (Kraus 2015; Kraus and Tan 2015; Mijs 2018). Americans who achieve upward mobility are also less likely than those elsewhere to identify with their class origins (Naudet and George 2018).

This relative absence of class identity in the US may have implications for the mechanisms driving class-origin pay gaps identified elsewhere. For example, embodied aspects of class-cultural division in the workplace, such as differences in accent, dress and taste, may be present but more muted and less consequential in the US than in other countries. Further, while people in the UK readily identify one another’s accents as “posh” or “working-class,” along with any number of regional and even local variations (Donnelly, Baratta, and Gamsu 2019), most people in the United States presume accents are purely regional or sometimes racialized, but not classed (but see Kraus et al. 2019).

The second stream of work that casts doubt over class-origin pay gaps in the US focuses on the role of education. This literature shows that in the US higher education represents a “great equalizer” that irons out class inequalities in the workplace. This was initially informed by Hout’s (1984, 1988) classic studies, which showed that the direct effect of class origin on occupational attainment in the US was almost entirely eliminated once people have obtained a bachelor’s degree. As Hout asserted: “This finding provides a new answer to the old question about overcoming disadvantaged origins: A college degree can do it” (1988: 1391). This equalisation thesis has largely been supported by subsequent work (Karlson 2019; Pfeffer and Hertel 2015), particularly the influential recent analysis of a team of economists led by Raj Chetty. Examining the income mobility of over 30 million US students from 1993-2011, Chetty et al (2017) find that children from different income backgrounds achieve relatively similar earnings in the labour market if they attend the same college.

However, it is worth noting that this equalisation is somewhat contested, particularly among sociologists. Some have highlighted, for example, that the relationship between origins and destinations reappears among advanced degree holders (Torche 2011), when accounting for more fine-grained types of university (Zhou 2019) and when looking at intergenerational earnings rather than occupational mobility (Witteveen and Attewell 2017, 2020). The 2017 Chetty et al study itself

shows a gap in average earnings percentiles between of between 6.5 and 10 income percentiles between the lowest- and highest-income-origin college attendees.² Qualitative studies highlight the stark differences in the college experiences of students from different class origins (e.g. Armstrong and Hamilton 2015; Goldrick-Rab 2016; Hurst 2019; Richards 2020). Nonetheless, Torche (2018) has recently reintroduced the notion that education can act as an equaliser, showing that among the highest academic attainers – PhD holders – there is very little relationship between social origin and future earnings.

Finally, a powerful research tradition shows that class position is inextricably tied to racial inequality in the US, such that race may simply trump class origins in terms of earnings. For example, there is ample evidence that Black people and other people of color, and women of all racial-ethnic groups, face barriers to both entering *and* advancing within occupations that were historically reserved for privileged white men (Wingfield and Chavez 2020). And a rich body of research demonstrates that glass gender and race ceilings and gender and racial-ethnic pay gaps pervade the US labor market as a whole and professional and managerial occupations specifically (e.g. Collins 1993; Gorman and Kmec 2009; Lacy 2004; Wingfield and Wingfield 2014; Woodson 2015, 2023; Yavorsky et al. 2019). In other words, it could be that the benefits of whiteness accrue to all white people in higher managerial and professional occupations regardless of their class origin, so that white people from working class origins fare similarly to white people from privileged origins. And it would certainly not be unreasonable to think that racism reduces or eliminates the advantages that a privileged class origin might confer for Black people and other people of color, so that we would not expect to see a class-origin pay gap among minoritized racial groups, either.

Although these research traditions point toward the muted significance of class in the US, they have not gone uncontested. Indeed there is a voluminous literature in the US probing the wider topic of the “long shadow” of class origin (Lareau 2015), and a large body of research pointing to various ways that privileged origins shape labor market outcomes. Early touchstones in this regard include the work of Jencks et al (1972), who detected a significant direct effect of class origin on pay across all US workers, Pfeffer’s (1977) work on class-origin pay gaps among graduates from the same business school, and Useem and Karabel’s work on corporate executives (1986). More recently, the pathbreaking work of Rivera and collaborators (2011, 2015) has shown the barriers that those from working-class origins (along with women and people of color from all class origins) face at every step of the recruitment and hiring process at elite professional service firms. First, top firms eliminate nearly every applicant who did not attend an elite college or university. They then put applicants through a series of “informal” recruitment activities, such as cocktail parties and mixers, that are generally uncomfortable and unfamiliar to those from working-class backgrounds. Finally, when formal interviews happen, selectors often eschew official criteria and evaluate candidates more on how *at ease* they seem, whether they build rapport in the interview, and whether they share common interests. Rivera describes this process as “cultural matching.” Alongside this, other innovative work has also probed the way cultural signals of class origin, such as accent (Kraus et al. 2019) or highbrow omnivorous taste (Koppman 2015; Thomas 2018) can affect hiring decisions in a range of high-status US occupations, and particularly work against women (Rivera and Tilcsik 2016). Most recently, Chetty et al (2023) have shown that elite Ivy-plus colleges play an important role in

amplifying class-origin gaps in the US, acting both as key switchboards to prestigious firms and high incomes but also providing students from high-income backgrounds with a significant admissions advantage.

In sum, then, there remains ambivalence within US scholarship about the long shadow of class origin, and a striking absence of work examining this in the specific context of who gets ahead in America's higher professional and managerial occupations. In this paper we address this issue, asking: do upwardly mobile individuals in high-status occupations attain the same levels of earnings as people from more privileged backgrounds? And if not, can this be explained by the racial composition of the two groups, or by differences in educational attainment, occupation, or work context? If not, we may say that a "class ceiling" persists when we compare otherwise similar people from different class backgrounds.

Data and Methods

We draw here on data from the US Panel Study of Income Dynamics. We use the WZB PSID code (Brady and Kohler 2019; see also Brady, Finnigan, and Hübgen 2017) combined with the more detailed occupational information about respondents' current main job available in public PSID files (Survey Research Center 2020). Our analyses focus on four recent waves: 2013, 2015, 2017, and 2019.

The PSID is a well-known long-running panel study which oversamples families who are Black and/or low income. While it is a panel study and therefore not a representative sample, it is possible to use the weights provided to approximate a nationally representative sample. However, following Hertel and Groh-Samberg (2014), we report unweighted results when we are looking only at those in top occupations, as the cross-sectional individual weight provided by the PSID gives a weight of zero to a significant portion of respondents. When we report descriptive statistics or display figures for a bivariate relationship among those in top jobs, we generally use the most recent wave in which a respondent completed the survey.

The PSID asks respondents what each parent's "usual occupation" was when they were "growing up" and codes both parents' occupations and individuals' occupations to the US SOC 2000 occupational codes in 2013 and 2015, and the 2010 SOC codes in 2017 and 2019. We used Morgan and Lee's supplemental table (2017) to assign each occupation to one of the ten standard Erikson-Goldthorpe-Portocarero categories (abbreviated "EGP" - Erikson, Goldthorpe, and Portocarero 1979); when respondents report only one parent's occupation, that is used for their origin group; when they report an occupation for each parent, they are given the origin of the higher-class parent (the "dominance" approach - Erikson 1984). Focusing on the parental occupations of those currently employed in EGP I (higher professional and managerial occupations), we consolidate EGP into four origin groups. The first two are simply the top two classes, EGP I (higher professionals and managers, which we also call intergenerationally stable) and EGP II (lower professionals and managers). We next constructed an "Intermediate" group including those with parents in EGP IIIa (higher routine nonmanual & service), IVc (agricultural owners & managers), V (higher technicians & supervisors), and all military occupations. Finally, the group we call "Routine/Manual" or "Working Class" is made up of EGP Classes VI ("skilled" manual

workers), IIIb (lower routine nonmanual & service), VIIa (“semiskilled” & “unskilled” workers), and VIIb (agricultural workers). Table 1 shows the distribution of individual respondents and person-year observations in our analyses from each class origin group, and the key variables used in regressions.

Table 1

	TOTAL UNIQUE INDIVIDU ALS (N = 1290)	TOTAL ACROSS ALL PERSON- YEARS (N = 2,982)	ORIGIN: HIGHER PROF/ MGR (PERSON -YEARS = 823)	ORIGIN: LOWER PROF/ MGR (PERSON- YEARS = 603)	ORIGIN: INTERME DIATE (PERSON- YEARS = 837)	ORIGIN: ROUTINE/ MANUAL (PERSON- YEARS = 719)
<i>Racial groups</i>						
Black	189 (14.7%)	397 (13.3%)	37 (4.5%)	83 (13.8%)	118 (14.1%)	159 (22.1%)
White	944 (73.2%)	2,227 (74.7%)	668 (81.2%)	463 (76.8%)	627 (74.9%)	469 (65.2%)
Other Race or Ethnicity	65 (5.0%)	131 (4.4%)	30 (3.6%)	28 (4.6%)	29 (3.5%)	44 (6.1%)
Asian, Pacific Islander	56 (4.3%)	136 (4.6%)	70 (8.5%)	17 (2.8%)	35 (4.2%)	14 (1.9%)
Other	36 (2.8%)	91 (3.1%)	18 (2.2%)	12 (2.0%)	28 (3.3%)	33 (4.6%)
<i>Age</i>						
Average	44.1	43.4	42.4	42.1	43.9	45.0
Median	41	41	39	40	42	42
<i>Gender</i>						
Men	699 (54.2%)	1,659 (55.6%)	500 (60.8%)	364 (60.4%)	450 (53.8%)	345 (48.0%)
Women	591 (45.8%)	1,323 (44.4%)	323 (39.2%)	239 (39.6%)	387 (46.2%)	374 (52.0%)
<i>Education</i>						
Less than BA	263 (20.4%)	478 (16.0%)	77 (9.4%)	81 (13.4%)	132 (15.8%)	188 (26.1%)
Bachelor’s	493 (38.2%)	1,184 (39.7%)	305 (37.1%)	235 (39.0%)	344 (41.1%)	300 (41.7%)
MA	324 (25.1%)	746 (25.0%)	211 (25.6%)	157 (26.0%)	226 (27.0%)	152 (21.1%)
MD PhD Law	210 (16.3%)	574 (19.2%)	230 (27.9%)	130 (21.6%)	135 (16.1%)	79 (11.0%)
<i>Occupation Group</i>						
Engineers	166 (12.9%)	422 (14.2%)	136 (16.5%)	79 (13.1%)	120 (14.3%)	87 (12.1%)
Academics	119 (9.2%)	275 (9.2%)	81 (9.8%)	37 (6.1%)	94 (11.2%)	63 (8.8%)
Scientists	65 (5.0%)	165 (5.5%)	46 (5.6%)	35 (5.8%)	51 (6.1%)	33 (4.6%)
Accountants etc	138 (10.7%)	319 (10.7%)	55 (6.7%)	74 (12.3%)	81 (9.7%)	109 (15.2%)
Business Analysts	129 (10.0%)	259 (8.7%)	65 (7.9%)	40 (6.6%)	91 (10.9%)	63 (8.8%)
CEOs	56 (4.3%)	115 (3.9%)	32 (3.9%)	18 (3.0%)	28 (3.3%)	37 (5.1%)
Doctors	121 (9.4%)	328 (11.0%)	126 (15.3%)	69 (11.4%)	69 (8.2%)	64 (8.9%)
IT Professionals	193 (15.0%)	415 (13.9%)	109 (13.2%)	94 (15.6%)	108 (12.9%)	104 (14.5%)
Lawyers	92 (7.1%)	250 (8.4%)	95 (11.5%)	64 (10.6%)	59 (7.0%)	32 (4.5%)
Other Managers	116 (9.0%)	234 (7.8%)	53 (6.4%)	36 (6.0%)	73 (8.7%)	72 (10.0%)
Public Sector	95 (7.4%)	200 (6.7%)	25 (3.0%)	57 (9.5%)	63 (7.5%)	55 (7.6%)
Avg Firm Size	3,651	2,745	2,083	1,236	4,943	2,138
Avg Hrs per Week	41.8	42	42.8	42.2	41.7	41.4
Avg Months on Job	103.5	106.9	96.1	103.2	106.4	122.9
Average Earnings	106,921	109,521	120,618	113,166	110,050	93,424

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for analytic sample

Note: Data from the 2013-2019 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics. Calculations, without weights, are based on those in EGP I in any wave for whom all variables listed (except those in the last 4 rows of this table) are non-missing in that wave, age is 25-69, and income is more than \$10,000 in that wave. Total unique person-year observations = 2982; total unique individuals across all four waves = 1290. Ns in the first column may total to more than 1290 and 100% due to variation in individual responses across waves. For categorical variables, percentage of each group is given after the N in each cell, for example 14.7% of respondents who were in EGP I and completed the survey at least once in the four waves identify themselves as Black; across all person-years 13.3% of people report being Black, and only 4.5% of respondents reporting an EGP I class origin are Black. For the last 4 rows, calculations are based on those in EGP I in any wave for whom *all* variables listed are non-missing in that wave, age is 25-69, and income is more than \$10,000 in that wave. Total unique person-year observations = 2428; total unique individuals across all four waves = 1018.

Regression models use all available person-year observations across the four waves; we clustered the variance to account for repeated observations of respondents across years, and we used robust standard errors to account for the imbalances (not all respondents have the same number of observations); models include dummy variables for wave, as well. We also conducted regressions for each of the four waves separately, and parallel analyses with and without using the survey weights (reported in the supplementary material); analyses using weights and for individual waves consistently return even larger effect sizes for class origin than those we report below.

We include in our analyses all respondents, their spouses, their descendants, and their families who participated in any wave from 2013 to 2019, and who were between the ages of 25 and 69 (inclusive) in that year. This gives us an initial sample size of 15,883 people, observed an average of three times over the four panel waves, and 48,324 person-year observations. In our analyses, we exclude all those who do not have information on parental occupation (1362 people)³ and/or who did not report employment in any of the four waves (an additional 1625 people).⁴ This leaves us with 12,896 respondents, 1,381 in higher managerial and professional occupations (EGP I). Most of our analyses examine earnings for those in EGP I; for these, we also exclude 51 respondents without reported earnings, or whose earnings were under \$10,000, and those without reported education, leaving us with 1,290 respondents, observed on average 2.3 times each, for 2982 person-year observations. For the regression analyses we use listwise deletion across all covariates in the models and are left with 1083 respondents, observed 2.2 times on average, and 2428 person-years.

In addition to dropping those with very low or zero earnings from our analyses, we also top-code earnings so that anyone with an annual income at or above the 99th percentile (based on the weighted distribution of income in the PSID) is coded as earning *at* the 99th percentile, or \$265,000. This ensures that our results are not driven by a few respondents with extremely high earnings.⁵

Access to EGP I

It is well-established in literature on class mobility, but worth stating clearly here, that there are big differences in access to EGP I by class origin. Figure 1 illustrates this: respondents from

advantaged EGP I origins are significantly overrepresented in EGP I destinations (they constitute about 13% of the workforce but 28% of those in top occupations) and those from working-class origins are comparably under-represented (they make up 40% of the workforce but only 23% of those in EGP I).

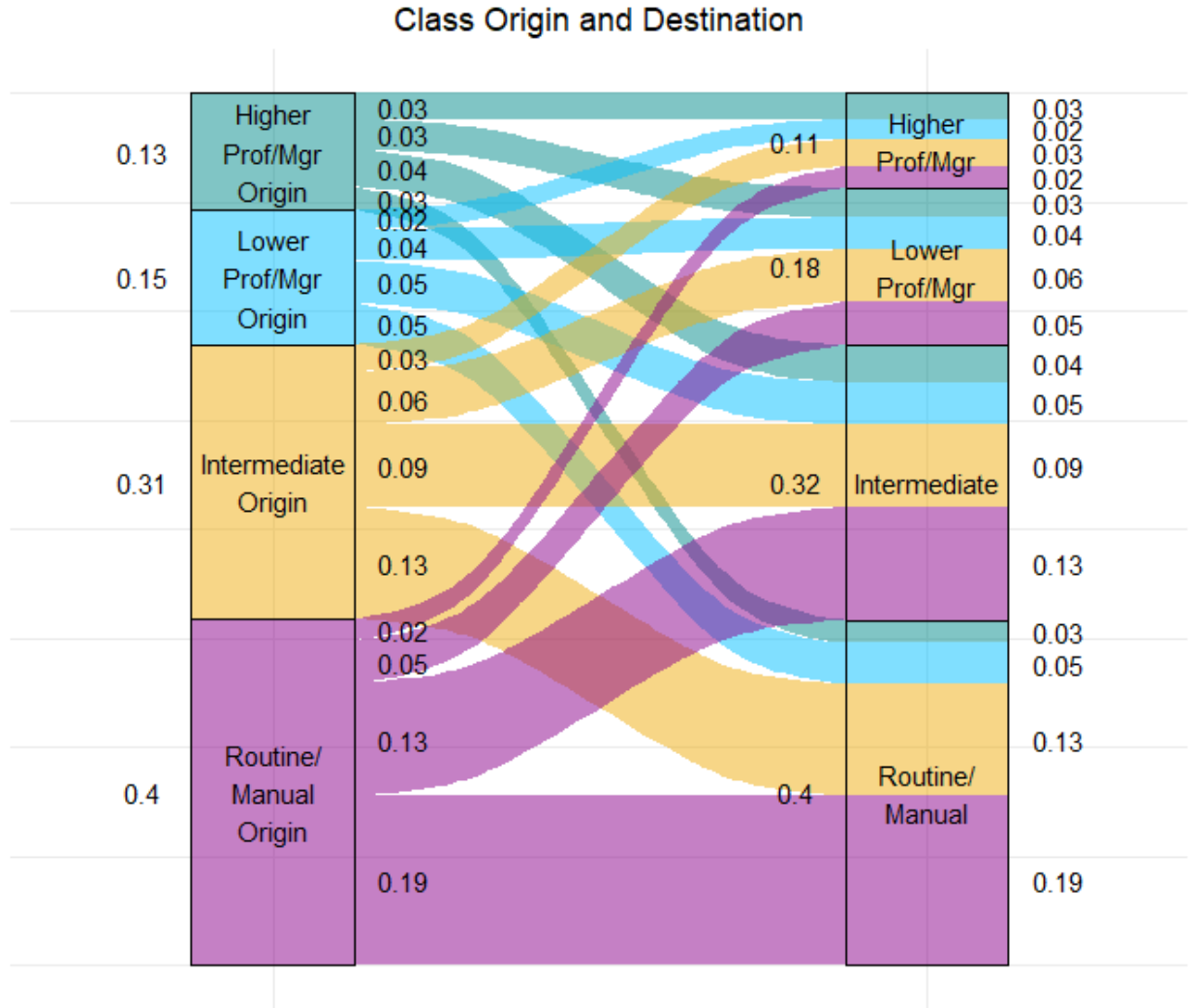


Figure 1. Class Origin and Destination, All Adults

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2017 wave. N=9471, all respondents included if they were between the ages of 25 and 69 in 2017, reported a current or recent occupation for themselves, and reported at least once parent's occupation. Based on a table created using cross-sectional weights (see supplemental material). Numbers to the left of each origin and destination group indicate the (weighted) proportion of respondents in each class group; for example, the 0.4 on the bottom left corner indicates that 40% of employed Americans are from families in routine/manual work (because of rounding, these do not necessarily sum to exactly 1). The numbers to the right of each class origin and destination give the proportion in each flow or trajectory; for example, the 0.19 at the bottom right corner indicates that 19% of employed people overall are from Routine/Manual origins and continue to work in similar jobs as adults; the .02 at the bottom of the Higher Prof/Manager destination on the left indicates that only about 2% (actually

about 2.4%) of all employed Americans have experienced the steepest upward trajectory, from working class origins to a job in the top occupational category.

To contextualize the results in Figure 1 it is necessary to consider the intersections between class origin and race. Historical and ongoing white supremacy in the US throws up barriers for Black people and other people of color in every aspect of their lives, from discrimination in housing (e.g. Roscigno, Karafin, and Tester 2009) to excessive policing (e.g. Kramer, Remster, and Camille Z. Charles 2017) to deep and persistent inequalities in health and health care (e.g. Sewell 2016). All of this, combined with both overt and subtle employment discrimination (e.g. Pager 2003), means that Black Americans and other people of color are disproportionately from poor and working class families, and working in routine and manual jobs (e.g. Laurison, Dow, and Chernoff 2020; Wilson 2011). In other words, the distribution of access to all valuable resources is tied to race and racism, and so (among many other inequities) Black, Indigenous, and Hispanic/Latino/x people in the US are disproportionately relegated to lower-pay and lower-status work (e.g. Branch and Jackson 2020; Omi and Winant 2014).

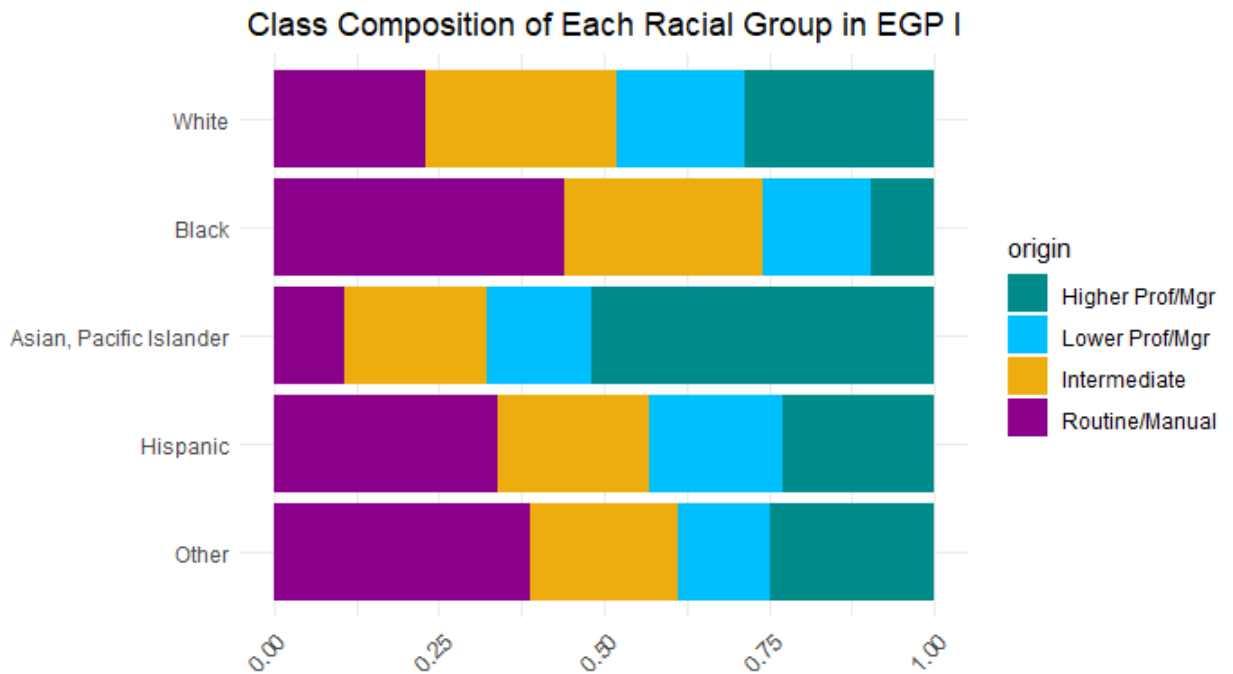


Figure 2. Class Origins for Each Racial Group in EGP I

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2013-2019 waves, N=1290. Proportions calculated without weights, all adults 25-69 employed in EGP I with non-missing occupation, origin, age, race, education, and earnings. Individuals are included only once, in the last wave in which they were valid respondents. See Appendix Table B for exact proportions of each origin group in each racial group.

Figure 2, therefore, shows the class origins for people who are white, Black, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Hispanic (of any race), or Indigenous or a member of another racial group,⁶ and employed in higher professional or managerial jobs. It shows that among all those working in top jobs in the US, Black people are the most likely – at 44% - to come from working-class origins, and the least likely – at 10% – to have had at least one parent in a higher professional or managerial occupation. Conversely, white and especially Asian people in EGP 1 are disproportionately those whose parents also were in higher professional and managerial occupations (at 29% and 52% respectively), and the least likely to have had working-class parents (23% for white people and 11% for Asian people).

Next we turn to the question of the different occupations that make up EGP I. When we aggregate into large EGP classes, the detailed dynamics of occupational contexts can get lost (Weeden and Grusky 2005). It is often at the localized level of disaggregated occupational groups or “microclasses” that the key processes of class formation—social closure and reproduction, identification and awareness, collective mobilization and exploitation—can most clearly be seen to emerge (Jonsson et al. 2009). To tap this, Figures 3 and 4 show the class-origin and racial composition, respectively, of each of the eleven “microclasses” that comprise EGP I (details on the specific occupational codes in each of these are in the supplemental material, Table C; it is worth a reminder here that when we split a sample into 11 groups we end up with fairly small numbers in some of them, as described in Table 1).

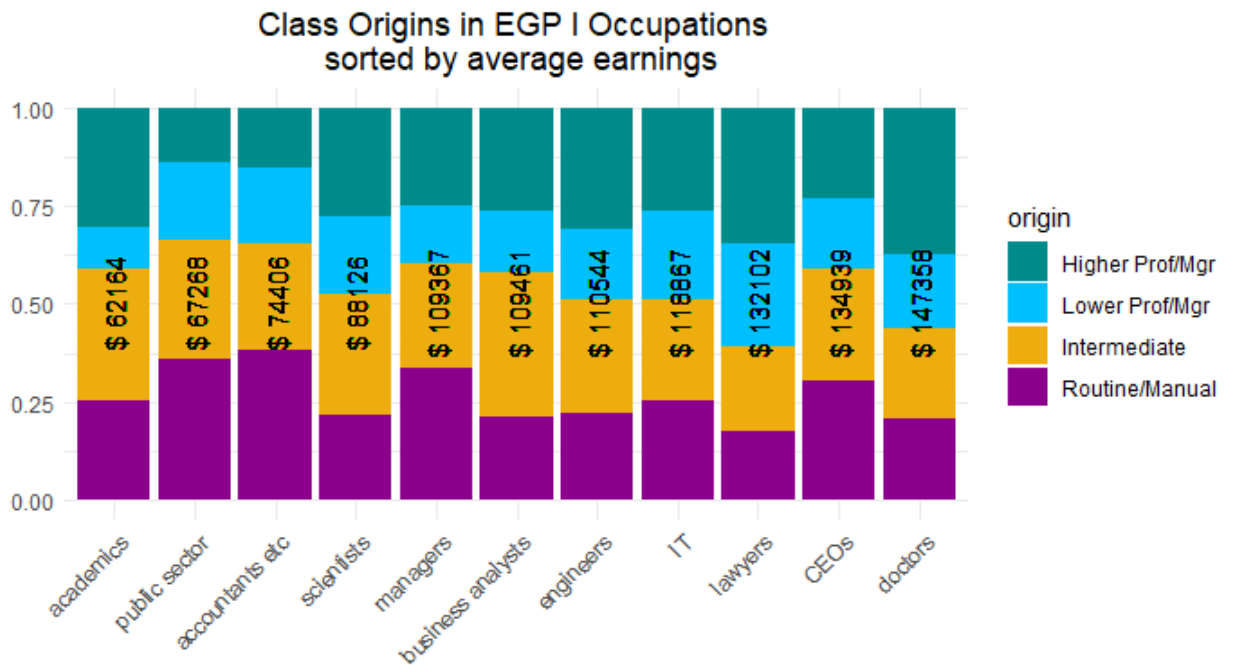


Figure 3: Class Origins in EGP I Occupations, sorted by average earnings

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2013-2019 waves, N=1290. Proportions calculated without weights, all adults 25-69 employed in EGP I with non-missing occupation, origin, age, race, education, and earnings. Individuals are included only once, in the last wave in which they were valid respondents. Dollar figures are average annual earnings for each occupation group (for those earning at least

\$10,000/year and with earnings over \$265,000 coded as \$265,000). See Appendix Table D for exact percentages of each origin group in each occupational group.

One key take-away from Figure 3 is that there is a fair amount of variation in the class-origin composition of different microclasses. People from higher (but not lower) managerial & professional backgrounds are over-represented in every occupational group in EGP I, except for public sector jobs (see Fang and Tilcsik 2022 who show that people from working-class origins tend to sort into pro-social, often lower-paid occupations); the share of intergenerationally stable people (those with at least one parent in EGP I) ranges from 14% in public sector jobs to 37% among doctors. People from working class backgrounds (about 40% of employed adults, as shown in Figure 1) are under-represented in every EGP I microclass except among accountants, at 38%, and the upwardly mobile are only 17% of lawyers in our sample.

Doctors are the highest paid group, and have the largest proportion of people from privileged origins. Two of the three lowest paid occupation groups (accountants and related, and public sector workers—though not academics) also have by far the smallest over-representation of people from EGP I origins. While earnings and class composition do not line up perfectly, the trend is for occupations with higher average earnings to have larger proportions of people from class-privileged origins, and fewer with working-class roots, than the lower-paid occupational groups.

Figure 4 displays the racial composition of the eleven occupational groups within EGP I. It shows that all higher managerial and professional occupations except, again, public sector occupations are disproportionately white. There is also significant variation in the racial composition of the microclasses that make up EGP I. Public sector and management roles are markedly more racially diverse than other occupations (at 31% and 26% Black, respectively, and 9% everyone else in both occupations). The largest over-representations of white people are found among engineers (83% white), lawyers (82%), CEOs (80%), doctors (80%), scientists (78%) and academics (77%). It is worth noting here as well that the most class-exclusive occupations are not always the least racially diverse – business analysts, for example, have a among the lowest proportions of working-class origin people, but one of the higher percentages of people of color, and the second-highest proportion of Black people specifically.

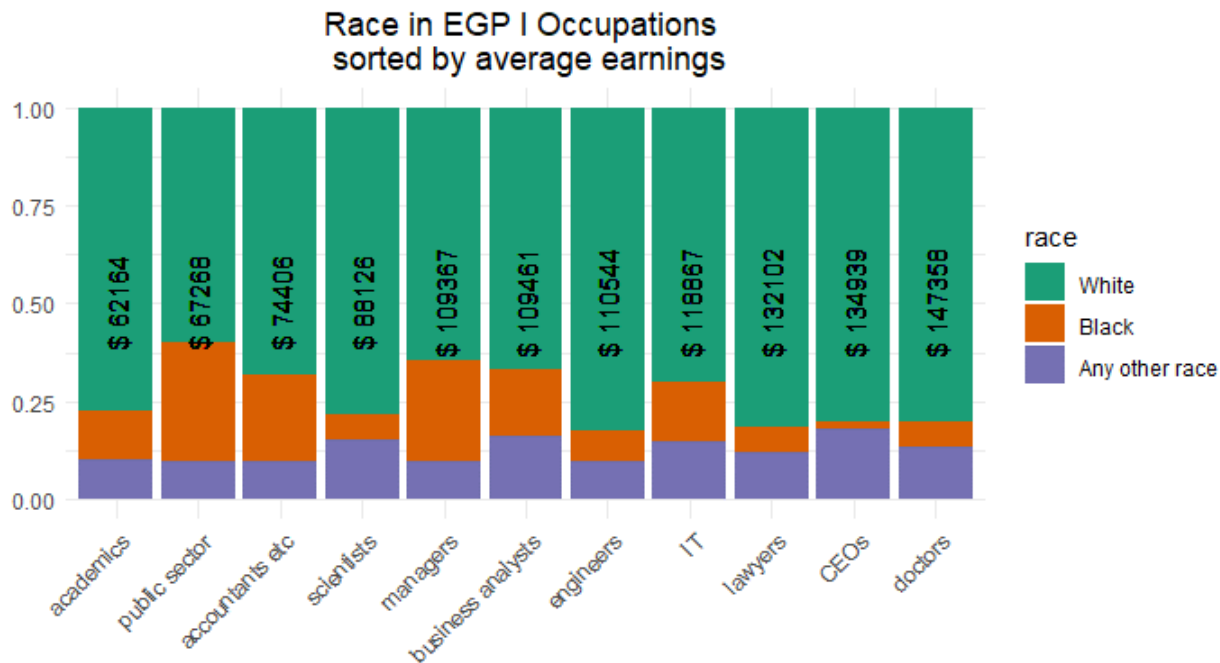


Figure 4: Racial Groups in EGP I Occupations, Sorted by Earnings

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2013-2019 waves, N=1290. Proportions calculated without weights, all adults 25-69 employed in EGP I with non-missing occupation, origin, age, race, education, and earnings. Individuals are included only once, in the last wave in which they were valid respondents. Dollar figures are average annual earnings for each occupation group (for those earning at least \$10,000/year and with earnings over \$265,000 coded as \$265,000). See Appendix Table E for exact percentages of each racial group in each occupational group.

Class Pay Gap

We now turn to the question of whether, once employed in higher professional and managerial occupations, the upwardly mobile enjoy the same levels of earnings as people from more privileged backgrounds. Our analysis demonstrates that there is a substantial class-origin pay penalty in America's most prestigious occupations. As **Error! Reference source not found.** demonstrates, there are large gaps between the earnings of those in EGP I jobs who are themselves from higher managerial and professional backgrounds, and all others in these occupations. Those from class-privileged backgrounds report, on average, annual earnings of \$122,151, which is almost 23% more than the \$98,593 reported by their colleagues from working-class routine/manual origins.

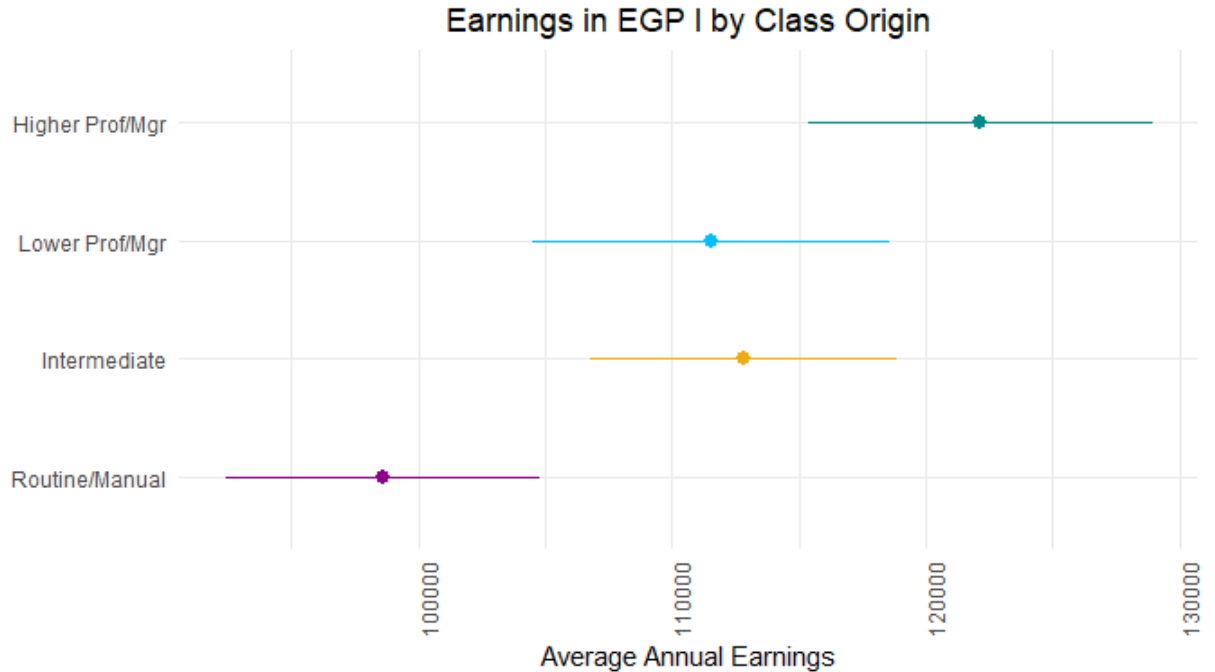


Figure 5: Earnings in EGP I by Class Origin

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2015-2019 waves, 2982 person-observations, 1290 individuals. Unweighted estimates of average earnings for each class-origin group (for those earning at least \$10,000/year and with earnings over \$265,000 coded as \$265,000), all adults ages 25-69 employed in EGP I with non-missing occupation, origin, age, race, education, and earnings. Dots represent the point estimates; lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. Models use all available person-year observations; a dummy variable for wave, clustered variance to account for repeated observations of respondents across years and robust standard errors to account for the imbalances. Among those in EGP I occupations, higher professional/managerial-origin people have predicted earnings of \$121,151; lower professional/managerial-origin people have predicted earnings of \$111,539; intermediate-origin people have predicted earnings of \$112,820; and people with routine/manual class origins have predicted earnings of \$98,593. The full regression table is in the supplemental material, Table F.

Given both the extreme racial inequality in the United States, and the relatively high proportion of people of color (particularly Black people) in EGP I who are from working-class backgrounds, it would be reasonable to expect that the class origin differences reported here could be driven by race rather than class. However, when we look at class and race together in Figure 6, we see substantial and statistically significant class pay gaps among white people in our top jobs: those from higher professional/managerial class backgrounds have predicted earnings over \$18,000, or about 18%, higher than those from working-class backgrounds. We also see some indication of a double earnings disadvantage for socially mobile Black respondents—both a class and a racial pay gap in top jobs; Black people from working-class families have predicted earnings that are more than \$41,000 less per year than white people from privileged-origin families, which means white privileged-origin people are earning, on average, over 50% more than Black working-class-origin people. There is also a racial gap among those from working class families, with white working-class-

origin people’s predicted earnings almost \$23,000 (28%) higher than Black people with parents in the same set of routine/manual occupations.

But it is important to note that meaningful intersectional analysis of class and race is hampered by the very small number of non-white individuals in EGP I—even with the Black oversample in the PSID there are only 190 Black respondents in EGP I in our data, and only 168 from other minoritized racial-ethnic groups (observed an average of 2.1 times across the 4 waves).⁷ Very few Black people in EGP I in the PSID are from higher professional-managerial backgrounds, which leads to standard errors so large for this group that no comparisons with other groups will be meaningful. This, of course, is sociologically significant in itself and echoes a wide range of literature highlighting the systemic barriers that prevent many Black people and other people of color from entering these top occupations in the first place (Pattillo 2013; Wilson, Sakura-Lemessy, and West 1999).

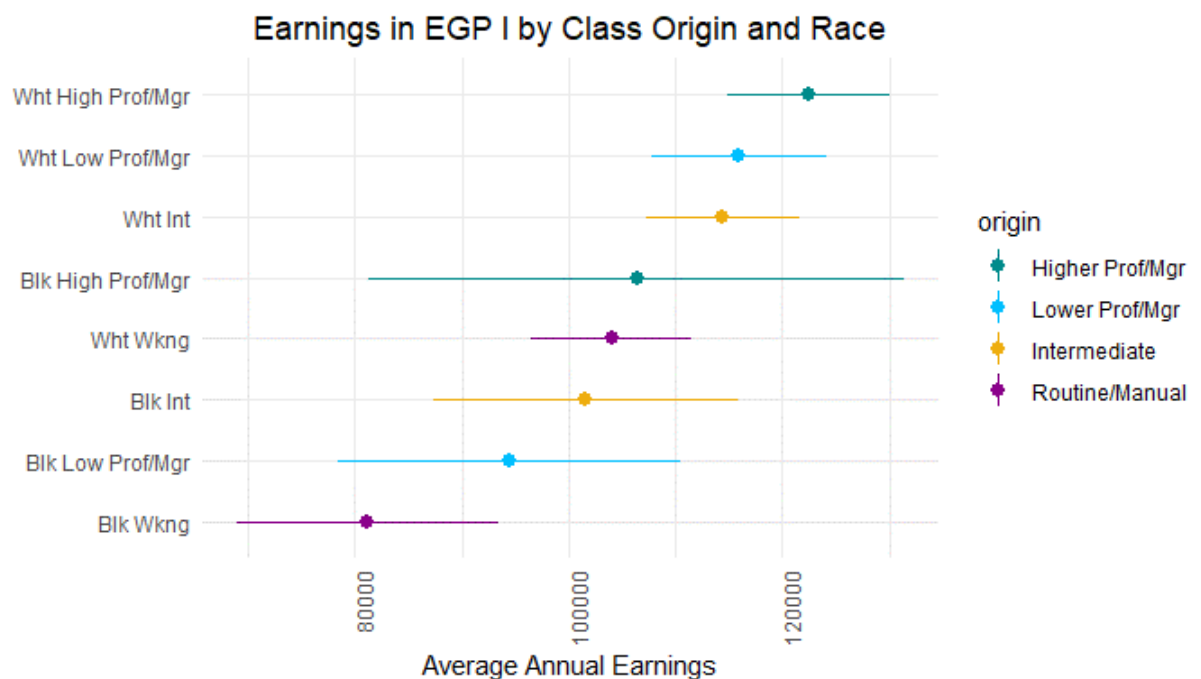


Figure 6: Earnings in EGP I by Class Origin and Race

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2013-2019 waves, 2601 person-observations, 1124 individuals. Unweighted estimates of average earnings for each class-origin-race group (for those earning at least \$10,000/year and with earnings over \$265,000 coded as \$265,000), all adults ages 25-69 employed in EGP I with non-missing occupation, origin, age, race, education, and earnings. Models use all available person-year observations; clustered variance to account for repeated observations of respondents across years, robust standard errors to account for the imbalances, and dummy variables for wave. Dots represent the point estimates; lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. Among those in EGP I occupations, White people from higher professional/managerial origins have predicted earnings of \$122,411; White lower professional/managerial-origin people have predicted earnings of \$115,924; White intermediate-origin people have predicted earnings of \$114,453; White people with routine/manual class origins have predicted earnings of \$104,024; Black people from higher professional/managerial origins have predicted earnings of \$106,376; Black lower professional/managerial-origin people have predicted earnings of \$94,402; Black intermediate-origin people have predicted earnings of \$101,593; and Black people with routine/manual

class origins have predicted earnings of \$81,182. The full regression table is in the supplemental material, Table G.

Next we examine intersections between class and gender. As noted, there is evidence that the experience of upward mobility is distinct, and often particularly difficult, for women (Friedman 2022b; hooks 1993; Lawler 1999). Figure 7 **Error! Reference source not found.** shows that there are class-origin gaps within both gender groups, and gender gaps within class groups as well; privileged-origin men earn \$18,400 or about 17% more than working-class origin men. Working-class origin women clearly face a double disadvantage—earning about \$19,500 less on average than privileged-origin women, and over \$50,000 less than privileged-origin men – so their predicted earnings are almost 69% higher than working-class women’s.

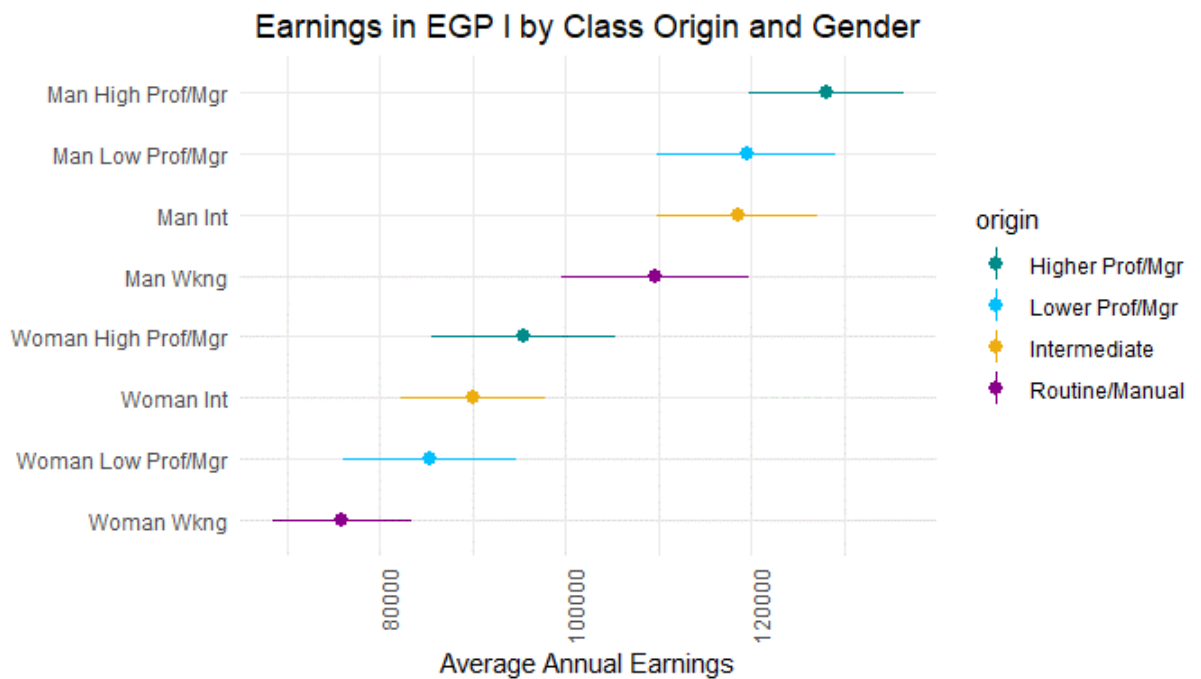


Figure 7: Earnings in EGP I by Class Origin and Gender

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2015-2019 waves, 2982 person-observations, 1290 individuals. Unweighted estimates of average earnings for each class-origin group (for those earning at least \$10,000/year and with earnings over \$265,000 coded as \$265,000), all adults ages 25-69 employed in EGP I with non-missing occupation, origin, age, race, education, and earnings. Models use all available person-year observations; clustered variance to account for repeated observations of respondents across years, robust standard errors to account for the imbalances, and dummy variables for wave. Dots represent the point estimates; lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. Among those in EGP I occupations, men from higher professional/managerial origins have predicted earnings of \$128,123; men from lower professional/managerial-origins have predicted earnings of \$119,944; men with intermediate class origins have predicted earnings of \$118,475; men with routine/manual class origins have predicted earnings of \$109,658; women from higher professional/managerial origins have predicted earnings of \$95,440; women from lower professional/managerial origins have predicted earnings of \$85,373; women from intermediate

class origins have predicted earnings of \$89,988; and women with routine/manual class origins have predicted earnings of \$75,874. The full regression table is in the supplemental material, Table H.

Of course, the distributions of earnings averages we have shown so far do not necessarily tell us whether the upwardly mobile face a “class ceiling” in top occupations. The upwardly mobile may, for example, simply be different from their intergenerationally stable colleagues in other respects. If they were younger on average than those from privileged backgrounds they might therefore be less far along in their careers; or, since the privileged, even among those in top jobs, have higher rates of educational attainment (see Table 1), that could explain the difference in earnings; or it could be differences in job tenure or how many hours spent working each week. In order to disentangle potential sources of class-origin income differences, we next perform a series of nested regressions to control for four sets of factors that previous literature has identified as pertinent sources of earnings inequality.⁸ The coefficients for class origin for each of these models are presented in Figure 8; the full regression results are in Table 3.

Table 2. Regression Models of Earnings in EGP I

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
<i>Origin (ref: prof/ mgr)</i>					
Lower Prof/Mgr	-8293.32 (4767.05)	-7043.75 (4538.00)	-3987.60 (4412.13)	-3784.82 (4198.63)	-4003.81 (3975.86)
Intermediate	-7466.74 (4530.81)	-8254.62 (4314.39)	-3078.00 (4216.60)	-2178.78 (3989.76)	-2306.79 (3772.70)
Routine/Manual	-19717.84 *** (4605.38)	-18993.08 *** (4433.25)	-11866.26 ** (4372.96)	-11954.08 ** (4155.30)	-11770.48 ** (3938.89)
<i>Race (ref: White)</i>					
Black		-9039.35 (4951.85)	-5389.45 (4807.69)	-4081.04 (4553.78)	-5954.30 (4302.55)
Everyone Else		4736.36 (4918.13)	4937.86 (4767.86)	3537.74 (4508.52)	163.02 (4268.72)
Woman (ref: man)		-26500.76 *** (3503.54)	-27632.32 *** (3392.75)	-22245.34 *** (3315.32)	-18243.84 *** (3138.67)
Age		1453.12 *** (146.75)	1361.55 *** (143.37)	1380.11 *** (136.23)	1232.89 *** (149.53)
<i>Education (ref: no BA):</i>					
Bachelor's			23711.62 *** (4320.57)	24767.74 *** (4097.03)	23606.50 *** (3889.05)
MA			22336.43 *** (4882.82)	26302.55 *** (4626.81)	25247.78 *** (4394.52)
PhD, Law, Dr			51903.64 ***	55866.97 ***	49682.65 ***

			(5623.13)	(6157.52)	(5854.16)
<i>Microclass Destination</i> (ref: academics & scientists)			23711.62 ***	23682.53 ***	22666.67 ***
accountants				10734.43 (5919.58)	6935.98 (5614.73)
business analysts				36501.29 *** (5793.91)	32704.32 *** (5504.28)
CEOs & mgrs				44397.61 *** (5270.50)	36706.39 *** (5043.21)
doctors				36107.57 *** (5708.01)	31123.18 *** (5462.43)
engineers				27631.20 *** (5288.35)	21030.48 *** (5050.22)
IT				42529.61 *** (5249.46)	38639.09 *** (4981.25)
lawyers				29434.83 *** (7153.60)	28717.19 *** (6818.17)
managers				1968.28 (6352.80)	-5204.20 (6084.71)
public sector				27631.20 *** (5288.35)	21030.48 *** (5050.22)
Firm size (ln)					1572.05 ** (517.49)
Job tenure					44.36 ** (14.24)
Work hours					1198.29 *** (83.17)
Intercept	122427.89 (3610.44)	71324.10 (7489.51)	48264.90 (8098.15)	16219.73 (8397.88)	-35824.78 (9314.45)
N	2428	2428	2428	2428	2428
Adj. r2	0.06	0.11	0.14	0.18	0.26

Note: Data from the 2013-2019 waves of the Panel Study of Income Dynamics; regressions using list-wise deletion; standard errors for each coefficient are in parentheses below the point estimate. Models use all available person-year observations; clustered variance to account for repeated observations of respondents across years, robust standard errors to account for the imbalances, and dummy variables for wave (not shown). * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Model 1 has only class origin in the model (plus dummy variables for the waves), with higher professional & managerial origins as the reference category; the coefficients are nearly the same as those identified in Figure 3; we see a gap of \$19,700 between the earnings of working-class-origin and privileged-origin people in EGP I.⁹ In Model 2 we add controls for age, racial/ethnic group,¹⁰ and gender. Taking into account these demographic factors slightly reduces the predicted class origin earnings gap between working class-origin and EGP I-origin respondents, to about to \$19,000/year. While there are differences in the racial/ethnic and age composition of each class origin group, they do not explain the class-origin pay gap.

In Model 3 we add educational attainment; specifically whether the respondent completed high school or less, has a Bachelor's degree, or a Master's degree, or a PhD or equivalent. As outlined in the introduction, education is still considered by some US scholars as the "great equalizer" when it comes to class inequalities in the workplace (Torche 2011). However, as Figure 7 shows, while controlling for education reduces the predicted size of the class-origin pay gap, a substantial gap remains even when comparing respondents from different class origins with similar educational credentials. Respondents from routine/manual class origins have predicted earnings \$11,900 lower than similarly-educated higher professional/managerial origin respondents.

In Model 4 we add occupational "sorting." Specifically, we include dummy variables for the 11 microclasses that make up EGP I (see Figures 2 and 3). Including occupation results in little change in the coefficient for working-class origin.¹¹ Finally, in Model 5 we add other aspects of the employee's work situation: the number of years they have been with their current employer, the hours they report working in a week, and the (log of the) size of their current firm. We still see a large class-origin pay gap—about \$11,700—even with these controls.

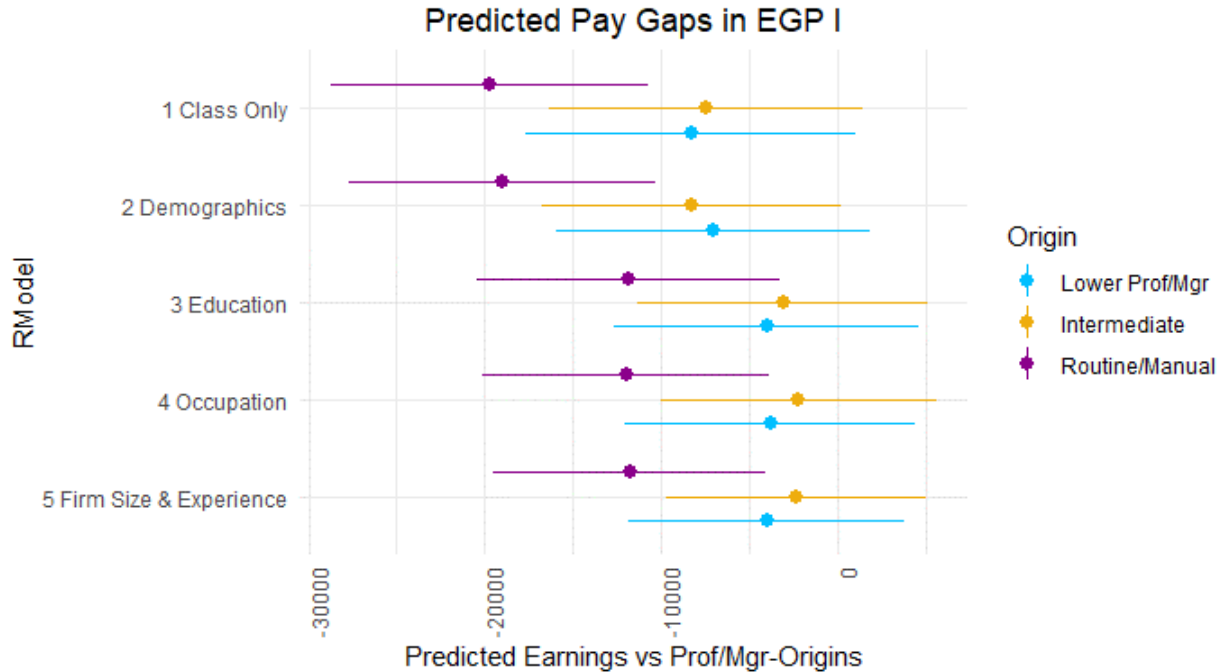


Figure 8: Predicted Pay Gaps in EGP I

Note: Data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2015-2019 waves, 2482 person-observations, 1083 individuals. Unweighted estimates of average earning gaps relative to those with EGP I origins, for the other three class-origin groups (for those earning at least \$10,000/year and with earnings over \$265,000 coded as \$265,000), all adults ages 25-69 employed in EGP I with no missing data on any variable used in any model (see Table 3). Models use all available person-year observations; clustered variance to account for repeated observations of respondents across years, and robust standard errors to account for the imbalances, and dummy variables for wave. Dots represent the point estimates; lines indicate the 95% confidence interval for each estimate. Coefficients are in Table 3.

Figure 8 illustrates the results of each successive model: even when we account for a person’s educational credentials, their individual occupation, the hours they work, and their level of experience, a statistically significant and financially substantial class-origin pay gap remains for the long-range upwardly mobile in higher professional and managerial jobs. Those from working-class origins who are otherwise similar—in every way we can measure—to those from privileged origins still have predicted earnings that are, on average, nearly \$12,000 less per year within America’s top occupations; that works out to a class-origin premium of about 12% for people in top jobs in the US who come from higher professional or managerial class origins.

Discussion/conclusion

Even when those from working-class backgrounds successfully enter America’s higher professional and managerial occupations, they face a powerful “class ceiling” in terms of earnings. The class-origin pay gap persists even after controlling for age, gender, race and ethnicity, education, occupation, and various aspects of work context. This inequality is also *comparatively* large. It is substantially higher than the class-origin pay gap (in top occupations) in the UK and France—

societies normally considered the exemplars of class inequality (Falcon and Bataille 2018; Laurison and Friedman 2016).¹²

This pay gap could reflect two distinct inequality-generating mechanisms. First, it may indicate that those from working-class backgrounds are *earning less for doing the same work* (that is, for doing jobs at the same level, in the same company and same department). Here a number of mechanisms that we cannot measure may be at work: those from working-class origins may be more reluctant to ask for pay raises, may be less likely to leverage promotions by threatening to leave, or may face forms of class discrimination, snobbery or “micro-aggressions” in elite workplaces (Lee 2017; Rivera and Tilcsik 2016).

Second, class pay gaps may indicate patterns of workplace *segregation*, that is, those from working-class backgrounds may receive lower incomes because they are less likely to enter the most prestigious specialties or departments (horizontal segregation) or because they are less likely to reach the most senior or lucrative positions (vertical segregation). In short, the upwardly mobile may face a distinct “class ceiling.” Indeed, while our analysis accounts for whether people sort into certain occupations or larger or smaller firms, we are not able to see other potentially pertinent sources of workplace segregation. However, following the work of Ho (2009), Rivera (2015), Friedman and Laurison (2019), Tomaskovic-Devey and Avent-Holt (2019), Chetty et al (2023) and Fang and Tilcsik (2022), it is likely that key mechanisms underpinning the US class pay gap are the filtering of the class-privileged into the most elite colleges and universities and then into the most elite high-paying firms, the most lucrative specialties or departments within firms, and the most senior positions.

These two processes are also sociologically distinct. Unequal pay for equal work is significant in that it indicates clear-cut discrimination in the labour market, whether directly (e.g. class prejudice) or indirectly (e.g. inclination toward pay negotiation). Segregation or sorting, on the other hand, implies that the upwardly mobile face certain threshold or “class ceiling” effects in their career progression.

Such “class ceilings” also contain a wider theoretical significance. This is because, as sociologists have long argued, when elites are drawn from narrow social origins, they are more likely to develop “a unity and cohesion of consciousness and action” (Scott 2008:35) which, in turn, may have profound implications for the exercise of power (Domhoff 2002; Reeves et al. 2017). This “elite closure” thesis is most prominently associated with Mills, who argued that shared class origins played a key role in “fusing psychological and social affinities” among the U.S. “power elite.” This commonality, he argued, “tends to make members of the power elite more readily understood and trusted by one another,” to “sympathize with one another’s point of view;” in short, “to say to one another: he is, of course, one of us” (Mills 1999:64–67; 278–83).

Clearly, follow-up work is needed to distinguish between these two different dimensions of class pay gaps, and to interrogate the mechanisms driving each. However, drawing on work on the UK class ceiling (Friedman and Laurison, 2019), we would encourage future research to focus on the numerous *resources* associated with class origin that we cannot measure here, such as the sponsorship networks forged on class-cultural homophily and elite work cultures where classed self-presentation is routinely misrecognized as merit. Further, while our analysis demonstrates that

educational attainment only acts as a limited equalizer, it is worth acknowledging that more fine-grained measures of attainment such as GPA, or “sorting” into more prestigious universities and subject-areas, may explain a further portion of the class pay gap.

Finally, we believe these findings have implications for US scholars of class and mobility, in two key areas. First, they provide an alternative analytical angle on the longstanding debate about the role of “college as the great equaliser.” While our analysis demonstrates that higher education only acts as a limited equalizer of class-origin pay inequalities, this does not necessarily mean our findings challenge the equaliser thesis. Indeed it may well be that in the labour market *as a whole* higher education acts to neutralise class-origin pay gaps but that when homing in on distinct segments of the labour market such as high status occupations, as we do here, such gaps become highly visible. This may be because, as the recent work of Streib (forthcoming) illustrates, in the mid-tiers of the labour market employers are less sensitive to class signals and less likely to (mis)recognise embodied markers of upper-middle class identity as merit or talent. Instead, they may hire using class-neutral criteria, focusing on students’ skills and technical competencies rather than class styles. In contrast, in elite occupations, class signals often remain pivotal. Such work is often characterised by heightened ‘ambiguity of knowledge’ and therefore the expertise of the worker is inherently uncertain (Alvesson 2001; Ashley and Empson 2013). What may be used to manage this uncertainty, as some studies suggest (Ashley and Empson 2017; Friedman and Laurison 2019), is a certain performance or image of competence that is rooted in the embodied cultural capital (modes of comportment, self-presentation and aesthetic style) inculcated via a privileged class background.

Second, we see our work as extending the reach of a growing body of research exploring the “long shadow of class origin” (Lareau 2015). This work has long elucidated the stickiness of class background in shaping people’s experiences of US schooling from elementary school through college (Armstrong and Hamilton 2015; Calarco 2018; Jack 2019; Khan 2010; Lareau 2011). More recently, a series of studies has shifted the focus to the labor market, and specifically, how the hiring practices of elite firms work to advantage those from privileged backgrounds (Koppman 2015; Kraus et al. 2019; Rivera 2015; Thomas 2018). While these studies are illuminating, their analysis starts and finishes with the issues of occupational admission. This reflects the longstanding sociological conceptualization of social mobility as a process that finishes at the point of occupational entry. We see our distinct contribution here as illustrating the ways in social origin systematically shapes how well people get *ahead* in America’s higher professional and managerial occupations, not just which occupations they are able to get *in* to.

Data Availability Statement

The data underlying this article are available in through the Michigan Institute for Social Research at <https://psidonline.isr.umich.edu> and can be accessed for download with an account through their Data Center (<https://simba.isr.umich.edu/data/data.aspx>).

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¹ It is worth noting that a recent paper (Lundberg 2022) does identify a class-origin pay gap in the US. However, the paper is focused on demonstrating a method rather than an empirical result, and uses General Social Survey data pooled over 30 years (to get a large enough sample size), meaning it is hard to draw reliable conclusions about whether the pay gap identified remains today.

² This study compares only those who attend the same college, without noting whether they graduate or not; some of this gap may be due to differences in graduation rates between students from lower- and higher-income families.

³ This is the exclusion most likely to produce bias in our results; however, when we examine those with missing origins, their earnings patterns are most like those with working class backgrounds; so we may actually be somewhat underestimating the strength of the relationship between class origin and earnings.

⁴ We also exclude the one respondent who had reported class origin and destination, but not racial group.

⁵ When we include the full range of earnings, we see similar overall patterns but much larger confidence intervals.

⁶ As with most surveys in the US, the numbers of Native American or other Indigenous respondents are too low to allow meaningful analyses – there are only 15 people in EGP I who report being Native American, Eskimo, or Aleutian – so we combine them into the “other” category.

⁷ Using the survey weights, the PSID data indicates that EGP I is only 7% Black in 2017; because of the oversample of African-Americans, the proportion of Black people in our analytic sample is about twice that. There are only 54 Asian-Americans, 33 who are Hispanic (of any race) and 25 identified as “any other race”—not enough for meaningful analyses by specific racial group.

⁸ We choose simple regression (with panel-data adjustments) on untransformed annual earnings for simplicity of presentation and interpretation; we have run robustness checks (available in the supplemental material) on these analyses using the log of income as the dependent variable, and using the PSID weights, and see fundamentally the same pattern—and generally much larger class-origin pay-gaps—across these model specifications.

⁹ These analyses are on a smaller sample than those in Figures 2 through 7 because some people who have valid responses to all the other the other questions do not have valid answers to the firm size and/or work experience questions in Model 5; dropping those respondents from Models 1-4 results in somewhat smaller estimates of the class-origin pay gap for Model 1 than for those shown in Figure 5. If we include those with this missing information in Models 1-4, we see the same pattern but somewhat larger coefficients; shown in the supplemental material Table

¹⁰ In order to reduce empty cells, we use a collapsed set of racial groups, distinguishing only between Black and white people and a third category for everyone else. In Model 5, discussed below, we also collapse the microclass groups into 9 rather than 11 categories, combining academics and scientists, and CEOs and managers. The class-origin coefficients from a model with the un-collapsed race and microclass variables are in the supplemental material, Table M.

¹¹ We have also done analyses of class-origin pay-gaps within each of these occupational groups; all groups except doctors, CEOs and engineers have consistent and large (though not consistently significant) gaps across various model specifications. Business analysts and lawyers have the largest class-origin pay gaps; our results are robust to removing either or both groups from the models in Table 3.

¹² Note that a direct comparison should be treated with caution given many important differences between the three studies, from the composition of the top class group in the different national class coding schemes, to differences in analytic strategy. Given that other analytic strategies with the PSID yield even larger estimates of class-origin pay gaps (see supplemental material), we are confident that the gap in the US is at least as large as those found by other scholars elsewhere.