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# Occupations As a Source of Career Outcomes Inequality: The Role of Personality Traits and Occupational Value of Status

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## **Occupations As a Source of Career Outcomes Inequality:**

### **The Role of Personality Traits and Occupational Value of Status**

Inequality, being deeply ingrained in human communities, necessarily involves myriad causes. Much of the literature on racial inequality in career outcomes has focused on attributions, decision-making, prejudices, and perceptual biases to explain endorsement of stereotypes and discriminatory behavior toward outgroup (Duckitt, 2010; Richeson & Sommers, 2016). While this work has illuminated some of the core processes underlying racial disparities in career outcomes, these processes are not the only lens through which inequality can or should be studied. Indeed, more “meso-” oriented research seems necessary to identify the specific aspects of occupations and work roles implicated in the perpetuation of racial disparities in career outcomes because various occupations reinforce workers’ needs and values in distinct ways (Dawis & Lofquist, 1984), affect their emotions, attitudes, and actions, and influence how individual traits are activated and rewarded (Dierdorff, 2019; Judge & Zapata, 2015). However, neither the occupational origins of inequality in career outcomes nor the personal resources that racial minorities leverage to overcome such inequality has received much attention from researchers. We offer insight into these issues by considering occupational value of status and the “Big Five” personality traits as crucial factors in racial disparities in career outcomes.

Our theoretical model of occupation-based racial disparities in career success involves two main arguments. First, we suggest that the occupational value of status serves as important mechanisms for perpetuating racial disparities in pay and job satisfaction. The theory of work adjustment (TWA) suggests that occupations promote different occupational reinforcer patterns (ORPs), which determine the occupational context through the presence or absence of occupational values along with the specific individual needs to be satisfied (Dawis & Lofquist,

1984). Particularly, *occupational value of status*, among six ORPs that TWA suggests, reflects occupations that provide opportunities for workers to be promoted, recognized, placed in supervisory roles, and respected (Dierdorff & Morgeson, 2013). These occupational characteristics are positively associated with career success due to their reinforcement of ability to deal with complex situations and their association with power and status, resources that generally correlate with hedonically pleasurable states as well as social acceptance (Anderson et al., 2012; Kilbourne et al., 1994; Williams, 2014). However, because Blacks workers are often stereotyped as lazy, irresponsible, and incompetent (Brezina & Winder, 2003; He et al., 2019) and perceived as occupying the lowest level in the U.S. social hierarchy (Bell et al., 2014; Dupree et al., 2021), we reasoned that Black workers have less access to occupational value of status. We argue, therefore, that the disproportionate access to socially desirable occupational environments reinforces career outcome disparities by race. Second, invoking theories about status incongruity and status characteristics, we expected that a competence-related personality trait (i.e., conscientiousness) would exacerbate occupational inequality and career outcome disparities because of backlash effects and strict performance standards triggered for minorities by the counter-stereotypical nature of the trait (Biernat et al., 2010; Rudman et al., 2012) and an increased perception of privilege competition among racial groups (Brief et al., 2005). By contrast, we expected that warmth-related personality traits (e.g., extroversion and agreeableness) would garner acceptance for minorities and reduce occupational inequality.

We tested these hypotheses on a large longitudinal sample created from an occupational database (O\*NET) and a large national panel data set (National Longitudinal Survey Youth 1997). The preliminary results of a panel data analysis with random effects model supported our model (Please see the Tables and Figures below).

This research makes an important contribution by offering an explanation for racial minorities' tendency to achieve less career success from the perspective of occupations. Emphasizing the roots of inequality in the heterogeneity of occupational environments related to both power and status (Bunderson & Van der Vegt, 2018), we identified an understudied way in which organizations distribute pay, promote job satisfaction, and maintain inequality. Furthermore, this research contributes to the personality literature, a considerable portion of which has been devoted to the effects of various personality traits on career success but has involved relatively little effort to connect these traits to the differential rewards that racial minorities and majorities receive. Our study accounts for the counter-stereotypical nature of a competence-related personality trait for racial minorities, specifically, why conscientious Black workers may not enjoy the positive effects of this trait on pay and job satisfaction that other workers enjoy. Additionally, we demonstrate the potential role of warmth-related personality traits in helping racial minorities overcome occupational disadvantages and the resulting disparities in pay and job satisfaction.

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**Table 1***Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Study Variables*

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19
1. Gender (L2)	1.53	.50	--																		
2. Mother's education (L2)	2.76	1.35	-.03**	--																	
3. Father's education (L2)	2.78	1.63	-.04**	.55**	--																
4. Race (Black) (L2)	.21	.40	.05**	-.12**	-.16**	--															
5. Race (Hispanic) (L2)	.15	.36	.01	-.23**	-.15**	-.21**	--														
6. Race (Mixed) (L2)	.01	.10	-.03**	.02**	.05**	-.05**	-.04**	--													
7. Race (Others) (L2)	.02	.14	.003	-.01	.03**	-.07**	-.06**	-.01	--												
8. Race (White) (L2)	.62	.49	-.04**	.26**	.23**	-.65**	-.53**	-.12**	-.18**	--											
9. Conscientiousness (L2)	5.69	1.08	.07**	-.02**	-.03**	.07**	-.01	-.03**	.01	-.05**	--										
10. Extraversion (L2)	4.81	1.35	.11**	.02**	.03**	-.09**	.02**	.03**	-.04**	.07**	.10**	--									
11. Agreeableness (L2)	5.04	1.10	.24**	.03**	.02**	-.02**	-.05**	.00	.00	.06**	.12**	.09**	--								
12. Neuroticism (L2)	2.93	1.28	.14**	-.01*	-.002	-.02**	.00	-.01	.03**	.01	-.23**	-.12**	-.27**	--							
13. Openness (L2)	5.53	1.05	.001	.03**	.03**	.05**	-.01	.01	-.01	-.03**	.10**	.24**	.18**	-.16**	--						
14. Age (L1)	23.72	3.44	-.01*	-.02**	-.03**	.02**	.01	.00	-.01	-.02**	.00	-.01	-.00	.00	-.00	--					
15. Education (L1)	2.38	.97	.08**	.13**	.13**	-.10**	-.06**	.01	.06**	.11**	.07**	.03**	.06**	-.07**	-.00	.32**	--				
16. Work hours per week (L1)	31.97	12.30	-.14**	-.06**	-.06**	.01	.03**	-.02**	-.02**	-.02**	.03**	-.00	-.07**	-.01	-.02**	.27**	.13**	--			
17. Occupational value of status (L1)	2.60	.64	.06**	.05**	.07**	-.06**	-.01	-.01	.04**	.05**	.07**	.07**	.04**	-.06**	.02**	.25**	.39**	.16**	--		
18. Hourly pay (L1)	13.85	10.96	-.08**	.03**	.06**	-.06**	.00	.02**	.02**	.04**	.04**	.07**	-.03**	-.04**	.00	.32**	.28**	.07**	.22**	--	
19. Job satisfaction (L1)	3.98	1.02	.02*	.03**	.03**	-.11**	.02**	.00	-.01	.08**	.07**	.13**	.07**	-.09**	.02**	.00	.05**	-.03**	.11**	.11**	--

*Note.* L1 = Level 1 (within-individual) variables (values that vary from year to year); L2 = Level 2 (Between-individual) variables (values that do not vary from year to year). Gender was coded as 1= male, 2 =female. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed).

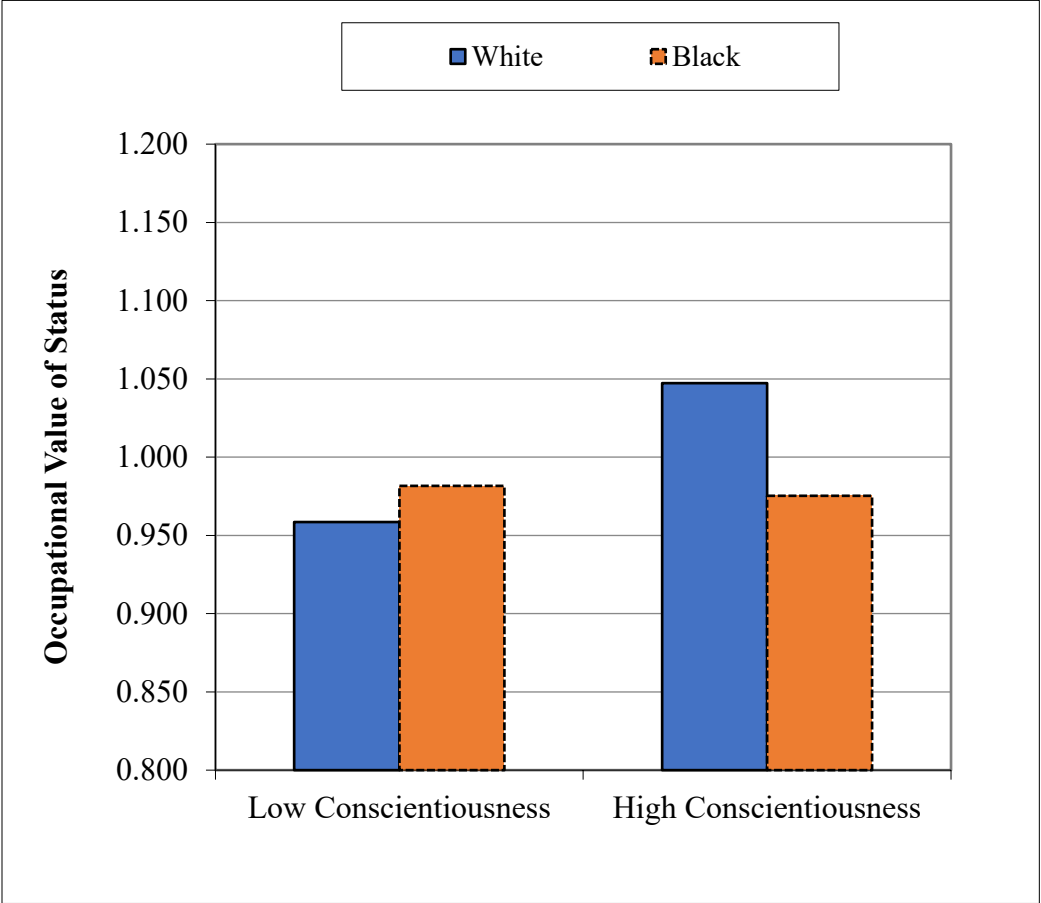
**Table 2** Random Effects Model Results Predicting Occupational Value of Status, Hourly Pay, and Job Satisfaction

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3		Model 4		Model 5	
	Occupational Value of Status		Occupational Value of Status		Occupational Value of Status		Hourly Pay		Job Satisfaction	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Intercept	.98***	.08	.99***	.09	1.00	.08	-6.34***	1.10	3.57***	.15
Age	.03***	.004	.03***	.004	.03***	.004	.60***	.06	.01	.01
Gender	.08***	.01	.08***	.01	.08***	.01	-1.67***	.17	-.004	.02
Education	.18***	.004	.18***	.004	.18***	.00	1.67***	.06	-.002	.01
Mother's education	.002	.01	.001	.01	.002	.01	-.02	.07	.01	.01
Father's education	.02***	.004	.02***	.004	.02***	.00	.12*	.06	.003	.01
Work hours per week	.01***	.00	.01***	.00	.01***	.00	-.05***	.00	-.002***	.001
Race (Black vs. White)	-.05**	.02	-.05**	.02	-.03*	.02	-.59**	.20	-.25***	.03
Race (Hispanic vs. White)	.01	.02	.01	.02	.01	.02	.28	.23	.02	.03
Race (Mixed vs. White)	-.11	.06	-.14	.06	-.13	.06	-.17	.85	-.07	.11
Race (Others vs. White)	.09*	.04	.10*	.04	.10	.04	.63	.57	-.14	.07
Conscientiousness	–	–	.02***	.01	.03***	.01	.23**	.07	.05***	.01
Extraversion	–	–	.02***	.004	.01	.00	.43***	.06	.08***	.01
Agreeableness	–	–	-.002	.01	-.01	.01	-.29***	.08	.03***	.01
Emotional stability	–	–	-.02***	.01	-.02***	.01	-.03	.07	-.05***	.01
Openness	–	–	.01	.01	.01	.01	-.08	.08	-.02*	.01
Race (Black vs. White) * Conscientiousness	–	–	–	–	-.05***	.01	–	–	–	–
Race (Black vs. White) * Extraversion	–	–	–	–	.04***	.01	–	–	–	–
Race (Black vs. White) * Agreeableness	–	–	–	–	.03*	.01	–	–	–	–
Occupational Value of Status	–	–	–	–	–	–	.97***	.08	.14***	.01
R sq	.18		.18		.19		.12		.05	
<i>N</i>	31,159(4,421)		30,992(4,392)		30,992(4,392)		30,992(4,392)		25,772 (4,317)	

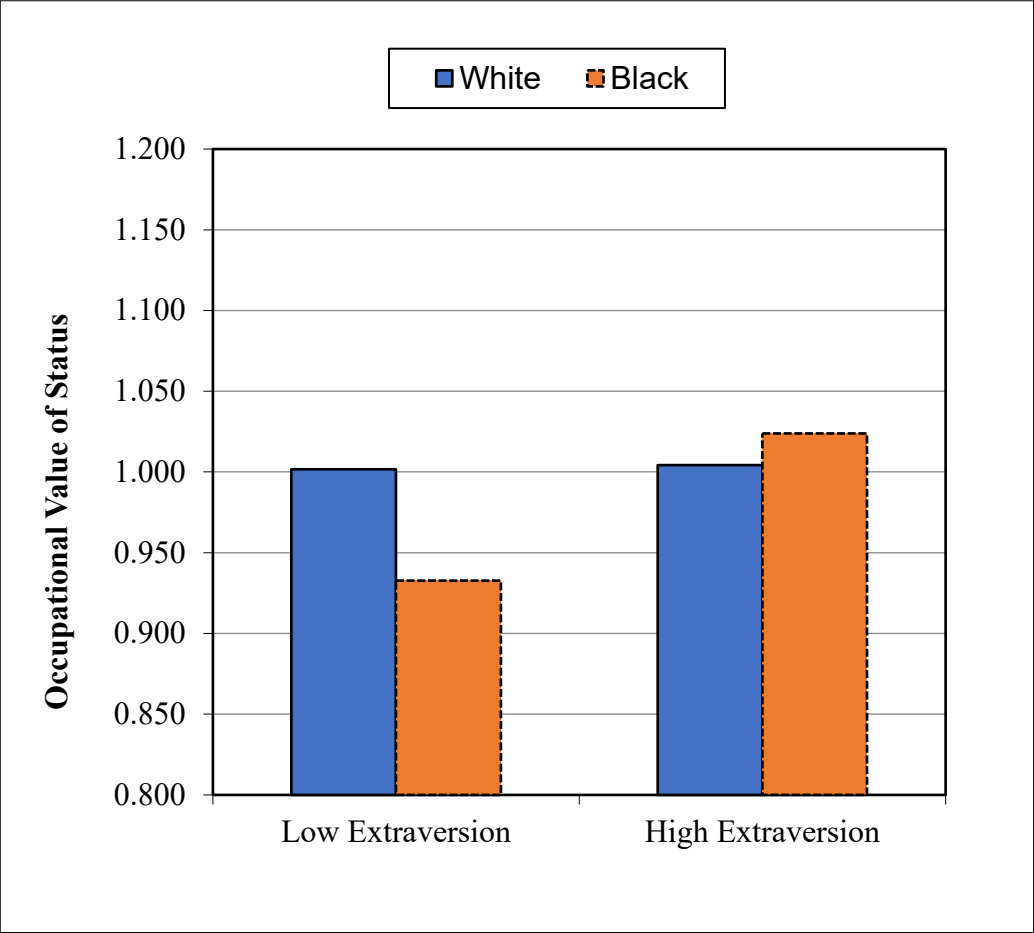
*Note.* *B* = unstandardized regression coefficient; *SE* = standard error. Years were controlled but not included in the Table. \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$  (two-tailed)



**Figure 1** *The Moderating Effect of Conscientiousness on the Relationship Between Race and Occupational Value of Status*



**Figure 2** *The Moderating Effect of Extraversion on the Relationship Between Race and Occupational Value of Status*



**Figure 3** *The Moderating Effect of Agreeableness on the Relationship Between Race and Occupational Value of Status*

