# Using cultural capital theory to study racial inequality: a case study of hays

CHAPTER 1:

# INTRODUCTION

In European society, resources, opportunities, and rewards continue to be allocated unevenly by race, and a substantial body of sociological research has endeavoured to explain these disparities. The current discourse on racial inequality is generally dominated by work located at the macro and micro ends of the theoretical spectrum. The former is concerned with structural, societal-level explanations for racial inequality, while the latter focuses more ondiscriminationandracismin individual experiences. However, researchers are beginning to pay more attention to the middle-ground explanations centered on the importance ofculturein racial inequality, particularly in regard to how racial boundaries and hierarchies are constructed between whites and blacks (Anderson, 1999, 29).

Cultural capital theory has emerged as a powerful framework for inquiry into the reproduction of social inequality. This framework considers how certain forms of knowledge, behaviours, and preferences help individuals gain an advantage in specific social contexts. Despite the theory's demonstrated power for the research on inequality, it has been used primarily in the study of adolescents, and has rarely been applied to the study of racial disparities (Compton, 2006, 81). In this dissertation, I demonstrate the relevance of cultural capital theory for the study of racial inequality by usinginterviewand participantobservationdata to examine racial inequality inside a major corporation. This dissertation contributes to our knowledge by examining how race affects the reproduction of inequality via the company's informal

cultural and relational processes. In other words, how are some employees disadvantaged or advantaged by their sociocultural behaviours and preferences, and how does race affect this relationshipThis dissertation is part of a larger research project that explores the impact of race, gender, class, and culture in the reproduction of inequality in the corporate workplace. By situating this research in a major corporation, I seek to gain insight into these processes in an institutional context that affects the lives of millions, while also contributing to our broader understanding of how culture is involved in the reproduction of inequality.

**Research Questions**

This project, while covering a wide range of sociological territory, attempts to answer three sets of research questions. Along the way, it asks important questions about how individuals are evaluated according to the informal standards of an institution. The first question documents the specific forms of cultural capital that are valued at Hays, and illustrates how employees who possess this type of capital convert it into advantage. In the process, it states the case for why cultural capital is an appropriate theoretical framework for the study of race and gender inequality in the workplace, despite it having been rarely applied in this manner. The second question demonstrates how cultural capital theory is appropriate for the study of racial inequality. It examines how race affects individuals' possession and activation of cultural capital in the workplace, and how some employees are disadvantaged or advantaged in this regard. It also addresses the intersection of race and class in Hays informal culture. The third question

examines how Hays dominant culture is gendered, and how this culture affects thecareerprospects of men and women differently.

In the three substantive chapters, the reader will find three common themes regarding my use of cultural capital in this project. First, I contend that cultural capital offers a powerful framework or the study of inequality that enables researchers to consider both structure and agency. Second, I demonstrate that this framework is useful for identifying the mechanisms that underlie the reproduction of race, gender, and class inequality inside an institution at the everyday, interactional level. Third, I argue that cultural capital provides more explanatory power than the frameworks, such as homophily and stereotyping, that are usually employed in this type of research. The dissertation closes with a discussion of this study's sociological contributions, the implications for future research, and a few concluding thoughts.

CHAPTER 2:

# LITERATURE REVIEW

The Chinese philosopher Confucius once said that by nature all men are alike but by practice they have became far apart. Differences in language, race, religion, behaviours and habits often lead to misunderstandings when two or more diverse groups are involved. In order to achieve organizational effectiveness and competitiveness HRM department must develop a strategy where diversity should be an opportunity to the company to retain good employees based on a fair employment system (Edelman, 2001, 1641).

Especially as a result of theglobalizationof the economy, in the last decades the role of workforce in the development of companies is vital. Studies all over the world (USA, UK etc) have shown that the majority of managers have limited notions about diversity and as a result believe that diversity training is done only for ethical and social reasons. Moreover, Johns, Hyde and Barton (2010) argue that planning a fair employment system among diverse groups is not possible asequalityand diversity are contradictory notions. On the other hand, Putnam's research (2007) demonstrates that diversity has a positive impact and helps companies to savemoneyand meet the expectations of their existing customers and win new ones. The first theoretical approaches of diversity started to arise on 90's in USA and gradually the discussion moved lately to whether and how a diverse group can increase the effectiveness and competitiveness of a company (Cox, 1993; Robert and van Dick 2010, 95). To begin with Kandola and Fullerton (1994) state that diversity includes the variety of demographic characteristics of people such aspersonality, gender, religion, language, culture etc. Moreover, Jackson and Joshi (2001) believed that an explanation of diversity management (DM) is the rising of domestic multiculturalism. Furthermore, Edgar and Geare (2004) support that DM should be flexible and use a range of strategies, starting from employment moving to training, empowerment, commitment etc. According to Robert and Dick (2010) team performance is a crucial element of HRM literature and is related with effectivecommunication, group trust and sense of sharing a common task. However those theoretical approaches are not connected with the development of companies (Bell&Virick, 1998, 75).

## Racial Theories of Inequality

Four decades after the passage of importantCivil Rightslegislation, race continues to be a major differentiating factor in American society, with whites holding a clear advantage over blacks in income, wealth, health, education, and many other important resources (Compton, 2006, 81). Theories that attempt to explain racial disparities tend to focus on racism at the macro- or micro-level. Current discourse on race is dominated by macro theories – such as the " racial formation" framework and the theory of " colour-blind racism" (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2003, 475) that blame structural, socially-embedded racism for racial inequality. Micro theories, on the other hand, concentrate on the causes and effects of racism at the everyday, individual level (Feagin and McKinney, 2003, 75).

More recently, scholars have begun to consider more closely the middle ground by examining what cultural sociologist Michele Lamont describes as " the cultural territories of race." This literature centers on the importance of culture in the construction of racial boundaries, the preservation of racial hierarchies, and the reproduction of racial inequality. In doing so, this work strives to understand the complex role that cultural factors play – going beyond, for example, more simplistic arguments such as the " culture ofpoverty" thesis (D'Souza, 1995, 136) – while recognizing the importance of both structure and agency. Exemplary studies include examinations of the status and stigma associated withfast foodindustry jobs for Harlem's working poor (Newman, 1999, 75), the ways in which black and white working class men understand social class and conceptualize the relationship between socioeconomic status and moral worth (Lamont, 2000, 75), and the

sociocultural experiences of black executives in the corporate world

(Anderson, 1999, 29).

**Cultural Capital Theory**

Despite the promise of this renewed attention to cultural factors and racial

inequality, relatively little attention has been paid to the relationship

between race and cultural capital, which has emerged as a powerful

theoretical framework for understanding culture and inequality. The concept

of cultural capital, developed by Pierre Bourdieu as part of a broader theory

of the reproduction of class-based power and privilege, concerns the role

culture plays in the reproduction of inequality. Bourdieu's model seeks to

encompass both structure and agency, as well as power, domination,

conflict, and legitimating (Bourdieu, 1990, 130).

Cultural capital refers to the role cultural tastes, behaviours, practices,

attitudes, and goods play in the reproduction of social class and inequality

(Bourdieu, 2001, 125). In other words, it is the particular forms of knowledge

(both formal and informal) and associated behaviours that enable individuals

to gain advantages in given social institutions or contexts. Cultural capital is

often valuable for leading to additional social capital – i. e., the resources

and knowledge gained through one's social networks.

An important concept is the activation of cultural capital. That is, cultural

capital is a resource that must be activated by individuals in social

interactions and social networks. Merely possessing a valued form of cultural

capital is of little use if an actor cannot activate or use it in an appropriate

manner in front of the gatekeepers or decision-makers in a given social

context. For example, discussing obscure rockmusicwith a corporate vice-president who prefers classical music is unlikely to gain one currency. Likewise, there is little benefit, in cultural capital terms, of activating this form of capital with a peer who cannot facilitate the conversion of one's cultural capital into additional resources. Thus, actors must skilfully activate their cultural capital at the right times, in the right places, and in front of the right people.

## Cultural Capital and Race

Relatively few researchers have studied the relationship between cultural capital and race, despite the framework's promise for the analysis of racial inequality. While a number of studies of educational inequality examine racial differences in cultural capital ( Lareau, 2003, 75), I am aware of just one study of race and cultural capital set in an adult context. Kaplan's research found that black architects are unable to influence popular styles and trends in the same manner as white architects, despite relatively equal professional credentials; a lack of cultural capital also constrains black architects' abilities to score high-profile design projects. Scholars have advocated the use of cultural capital to study racial disparities in medical treatment and the workplace. I concur and contend that, despite the scarcity of research in this area, cultural capital is an appropriate framework for the study of racial inequality in mainstream American and European institutions – a major corporation, in the case of this paper – for three related reasons.

First, a key aspect of the cultural capital framework is that this form of capital is used by dominant groups to exclude others from jobs, privileges, and other key social resources (Bourdieu , 1984, 96). Whites, as the

dominant race in American society in General (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, 480), and the corporate sector in particular (Reitman, 2006, 75); set the normative standards for appropriate values, beliefs, and behaviours. In other words, whites generally have more influence over the dominant culture in mainstream American institutions, and some scholars contend that whiteness itself is a privileged form of cultural capital. The extant research generally finds racial differences in mainstream cultural capital, although there is some evidence that socioeconomic differences explain much of the racial gap (Roscigno, 1999, 75).

Second, as noted earlier, cultural capital is a resource that must be activated by individuals in social interactions and social networks. As such, research finds that race and sociocultural interests play key roles in the formation of social networks that, in turn, lead to workplace success. Homophily research finds race to be a strong factor in the formation of networks in the workplace, and the most salient factor in the structuring of social networks overall (Cook, 2001, 75). Studies of corporate culture and the workplace underscore the importance of homophily at work. Kanter, for example, found that managers seek to hire employees who are similar to them culturally and socially, and evaluate managerial candidates based on their performance at social outings outside of work time, including activities that often require demonstrating certain cultural abilities (e. g., playing golf and hosting dinner parties). This creates a cycle of social closure which leads to the exclusion of those with different backgrounds. Indeed, workplace social networks tend to have a high degree of homogeneity in terms of race, class, and sociocultural factors. Importantly, social familiarity affects success within the workplace,

particularly in situations where social ties are important for the accumulation of knowledge and skills (Blair-Loy, 2001, 78). Further, studies have found a backlash against Affirmative Action policies and, thus, successful blacks in the corporate sector, which could lead to further exclusion from important workplace networks (Pierce, 2003, 80). Collectively, this research suggests that black (or anyone who is more socially distant from the dominant group in a social context) may be hampered in their ability to activate cultural capital in relevant social contexts.

Third, cultural capital is heavily influenced by social class, which is highly intertwined with race in American society (Wilson, 1987, 75). More specifically, Bourdieu contends that cultural capital is attained through two sources: one'sfamily(i. e., habitus: a set of internalized dispositions developed through one's family socialization) and education (Bourdieu 1984). Race shapes both sources in a significant way (Smelser, 2001, 75). Thus, cultural capital provides an excellent framework for examining racial inequality, as well as the intersecting effects of race and class.

**Racial Inequality in the Workplace**
The corporate workplace provides a promising site for the application of cultural capital theory to the study of racial inequality for two reasons. First, while many occupations remain segregated (McTague, 2006, 80), the workplace is likely the site of much interracial contact, given the extent of social and residential segregation in American society (Vallas, 2003, 382). Second, the work sector remains a site of much racial inequality, and I contend that this framework offers a compelling alternative to existing explanations for racial disparities inside the workplace. Racial inequality

persists in the workplace. Blacks earn less than whites in the short term and over the life course (Smith, 2001, 81), face a " glass ceiling" that limits opportunities for promotions , are more likely to suffer downward mobility from white-collar occupations during shifts in the economy (Wilson, 2004, 99), possess less workplace power and authority than whites (Smith , 2002, 77), and are likely to receive lower performance ratings from their supervisors than white men and. Significantly, black workers also still face hostility, discrimination, and negative stereotyping in the workplace (King 2005). Despite arguments that find class to be a more significant factor in inequality than race, blacks are clearly disadvantaged at work.

Research on racial inequality at work has mostly focused on the broader social forces that affect how jobs, wages, promotions, and other work opportunities are allocated by race. These factors include: job- and occupation-level segregation, organizational composition, job availability in urban centers (Holzer et al. 2001, 77), companies' hiring strategies, and job seekers' social networks and social capital (Smith, 2005, 89).

While this literature is essential for revealing patterns of racial inequality at work in England, it fails to explain much about how racial inequality is reproduced in the workplace. These studies – generally structural in theoretical approach and quantitative in method – are largely unable to identify the social and interactional mechanisms underlying racial disparities at work, leaving researchers to speculate about important relational processes (Reskin, 2003, 88). The movement toward more structural, survey-based research has occurred for a number of reasons, including a lack of

access to corporations, and an inclination, inspired by the work of William Julius Wilson (Wilson, 1996, 91), to focus on the social forces that affect the availability of work for urban blacks. In short, we have learned much about why racial inequality exists in the workplace, but know little about how it is produced and reproduced. Prominent sociologists of work and organizations lament this gap in knowledge and have drawn attention to the need for more innovative, qualitative approaches that investigate relational, interactional processes at work and focus on the mechanisms that produce inequality (Reskin , 2003, 79), including an examination of cultural capital (Vallas, 2003, 398). In particular, sociologists need to examine how race (and gender and class) are " done" or performed (Jackson 2001) at work, and affect workplace relations and individuals' opportunities for inclusion, success, and promotion. By looking inside the workplace, and by examining sociocultural interactions that occur once individuals are employed in a firm (as opposed to research on job acquisition), this dissertation answers the call by identifying an important mechanism in the reproduction of racial inequality.

The literature on racial inequality inside the workplace generally focuses on three complementary causes. The first is occupational- and job-level segregation. Blacks are often channelled into radicalised jobs, positions that are frequently marginalized and devalued because they have ties to the black community and/or are not occupied predominantly by whites (Williams, 2004, 96); spatial segregation within the workplace may exacerbate these effects (Vallas, 2003, 385). The second is homophily, the tendency for people to associate with others like themselves (Cook, 2001, 70). Homophilous processes lead managers – very often white males – to hire and promote

workers similar to them socially and culturally; which leads to the exclusion of minorities from vital internal resources and networks (Drakulic, 2000, 96). Third, blacks are often stereotyped or stigmatized in the workplace, leading to a host of negative consequences including black workers feeling isolated and alienated, and being viewed as only fit for certain types of radicalised jobs (Nkomo, 2001, 85). In short, job segregation, homophily, and stereotyping combines to limit blacks' chances for workplace success, mobility, and access to internal networks.

While studies on these three causes have added much to our understanding of racial disparities at work, they suffer from a common weakness that limits their explanatory power. In short, this literature fails to explain the interactional, relational mechanisms underlying job segregation, homophily, and racial stereotyping, leaving unanswered a wealth of important questions in the process. What happens to black workers once they are in radicalised positions, and what happens to those whose are in more mainstream positionsWhat is the sociocultural substance that drives homophily, especially given that, for example, all white males are not alike as the research seems to assume?

In other words, workers do not interact in a vacuum, nor do they respond to each other solely based on ascribed characteristics. It is important to know the substance and context of work related social interactions in or outside of the workplace – i. e., what are individuals talking about with their co-workers and where are they interacting– especially given that research has noted the role culture plays in connecting individuals at work (Erickson 1996) and in

society in general (Lizardo, 2006, 79). By not exploring the substance of workplace interactions, what is left is basic racial discrimination, an explanation that some leading scholars in work and organizations are trying to move away from (Reskin, 2002, 93). Similarly, others argue that discriminatory processes in the workplace are subtle and progressively harder to document, and that the very nature of racism is changing and becoming less overt. A cultural capital approach that centers on the content and context of sociocultural interactions at work corrects for these limitations in the literature.

Further, this literature falls short on both ends of the structure-agency debate. Research on homophily and stereotyping generally struggles to offer a critique of the racial workplace inequality at a structural level. While homophily and stereotyping imply a larger structural bent – i. e., racial stereotypes are rooted in structural inequality – larger issues of social class, exclusion, and power, as well as the interplay between structure and agency, are neglected. Conversely, arguments based on segregation into radicalised jobs fail to recognize the agency of black workers, and are unable to explain those who are successful and/or upwardly mobile. This is particularly important given that studies suggest signs of progress for black men in terms of obtaining management positions, and note the successes of certain types of diversity programs for black men and women in management (Kelly, 2006, 93). A cultural capital approach takes structure into account by defining the dominant institutional culture and how it is constructed, and considers agency by examining how employees activate their cultural capital in certain social contexts.

As noted earlier, the cultural capital framework holds promise for the study of racial inequality in general because of its emphasis on exclusion and power, dominant cultural norms and values, social networks, and social class; these points of emphasis make it a compelling approach to the study of racial inequality inside the workplace as well. Further, previous cultural capital research has shown that individuals' success in mainstream institutions, such as the school system, is not due solely to quantifiable performance (Lareau, 2003, 82). Rather, actors are rewarded for knowledge and behaviours related to informal standards and expectations favoured by the dominant culture of the institution – these informal standards are generally influenced by class, race, and gender. Likewise, research has found that workplace success is determined in part by certain cultural competencies – playing golf or knowing the appropriate manner in which to act at an expensive restaurant, for example – that enable some employees to be evaluated more positively (Kaplan, 2006, 96). Notably, the higher employees rise in a work hierarchy, the harder their performances are to quantify on an individual basis. Approaching workplace inequality from a cultural capital perspective facilitates the examination of these other pathways to workplace assessment and success, and provides insight into a key mechanism of work inequality.

In summary, cultural capital theory provides a robust and flexible model for examining mechanisms of workplace inequality that involve race and culture – importantly, this model goes beyond previous explanations of racial inequality at work (job segregation, homophily, and stereotyping) in explanatory power. The extension of cultural capital to a study of workplace

inequality is supported by Lamont and Lareau, who specifically noted the potential of this framework for studies of work inequality, as well as leading scholars in thesociologyof work and organizations (Vallas, 2003, 100).

CHAPTER 3:

# METHODOLOGY

**Research Design**

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is much more subjective than quantitative research and uses very different methods of collecting information, mainly individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups. The nature of this type of research is exploratory and open-ended. Small numbers of people are interviewed in-depth and/or a relatively small number of focus groups are conducted.

Participants are asked to respond to general questions and the interviewer or group moderator probes and explores their responses to identify and define peoples' perceptions, opinions and feelings about the topic or idea being discussed and to determine the degree of agreement that exists in the group. The quality of the findings from qualitative research is directly dependent upon the skill, experience and sensitivity of the interviewer or group moderator.

This type of research is often less costly than surveys and is extremely effective in acquiring information about peoples' communications needs and their responses to and views about specific communications. It is often the

method of choice in instances where quantitative measurement is not required.

## Literature Search Criteria

The relevance of the research topic and the publication year has been the criteria for the selection of appropriate literature. The usage of public, private and the online libraries has been made for the collection of the most valid available information. A few online databases for the gathering of data accessed are: Questia, Proquest, Phoenix, Ebsco and so on.

## Keywords

Some of the keywords that were used to conduct the search are: Workplace Discrimination, workplace diversity and discrimination, workplace race discrimination, workplace gender discrimination, racial theories of inequalities, capital culture and so on.

## Research Questions

In this dissertation, I examine how race affects the possession and activation of cultural capital in the corporate workplace. Specifically, are black employees disadvantaged in terms of cultural capital and if so, howDo white employees have an advantage in these processes because of their raceIs there an interaction between race and classAn examination of these questions is important for understanding broader processes of racial inequality, as well as adding to our insight of workplace disparities.

## Additional Methods Notes

When discussing the results, I note the interaction of race and class in my findings. I determine social class through a combination of self-reported

education, family income, current occupation, and family class background. Individuals that I identify as middle-class have college degrees and family incomes over ? 50, 000, and generally come from at least a lower-middle-class background; most have at least some managerial experience at Hays. In one instance, an interviewee did not have a college degree and was not in a managerial position, but was married to a physician and described herself as middle-class. I define working-class employees as those who do not have a college degree, have family incomes less than ? 50, 000, and who are employed in positions in the lower one-third of Hays hierarchy; all of these employees come from working-class family backgrounds as well.

## Culture and Race at Hays

The company struggles with diversity. Although official demographic reports of Hays employees were not available to me, reliable internal estimates placed the company's percentage of professional jobs filled by blacks at roughly 5%. (I define " professional jobs" as those that require a college degree or significant professional experience, which includes most of the white collar jobs at Hays with the exception of positions in the call centre and customer service departments. For the most part, these jobs do not offer much in the way of a career path at the company.) The majority of Hays non-professional jobs are occupied by blacks – likewise, the majority of Hays black employees work in these positions. There are just two blacks in the top echelon of Hays upper management, which is comprised of roughly 30-35 executives.

Two years ago, the executive management team announced increasing diversity as a major goal for the company, creating committees to study the

issue, and issuing a directive that a " diversity candidate" must be included for interviews of any position above a lower middle management level. Significantly, while the company officially defines diversity broadly – i. e., in terms of ethnic background, management and communication styles, and personal differences – it is operationalized in hiring processes and company events strictly in racial and ethnic terms. Hays employees I interviewed were forthright with criticisms of the company's handling of diversity, with their complaints taking three forms. First, black participants expressed frustration with the lack of blacks in upper and executive management positions, as well as insincere or poorly handled attempts at dealing with diversity (e. g., " ethnic" lunches to celebrate black or Asian culture). Second, blacks and racially progressive whites criticized Hays's minority recruitment, stating that the company does not endeavour to attract quality minority candidates. This induces frustration when employees feel forced to interview diversity candidates that do not appear qualified, thus dooming efforts to increase diversity tofailure. Third, some white employees believe that the company's emphasis on diversity gives too much latitude to blacks who are unqualified or perform inadequately. Despite these issues, race relations overall at Hays appear to be mostly positive.

**Defining Cultural Capital at Work**

An important aspect of cultural capital theory is that different types of cultural capital are valued in different contexts – what is valued is determined by the dominant group in a given institution or " field," to use Bourdieu's terminology (Lareau and Horvat, 1999, 100). For example, while knowledge about the fine arts might serve as cultural capital among societal

elites, Erickson found this to be less useful in a work setting than knowledge about popular, mainstream culture, which was important for connecting employees across class and managerial boundaries. Lamont and Lareau contend that before discussing the effects of cultural capital in a given context, researchers must first document its valued forms: i. e., what are the various ways in which individuals are evaluated in a particular context (with a focus on informal methods of evaluation), and how does an individual's social location affect their ability to meet these expectations?

In this dissertation, I documented three forms of cultural capital that are significant for success and advancement at Hays, a large, multinational corporation headquartered in the Midwest. The first form is knowledge about informal expectations and an understanding of the importance of the company's sociocultural realm. From executive management down to entry-level workers with college degrees, there is a consensus that employees cannot succeed at Hays without knowing about and participating appropriately in certain sociocultural activities. Knowledge about the importance of the informal culture, as well as the rules that govern it, is vital: one cannot play or win a game when one is not aware that it exists or is worth one's time.

The second form of cultural capital valued at Hays is the ability to participate in and navigate a range of informal social events, including happy hours, loosely organized nights at local pubs or restaurants, and co-ed sports teams. These informal activities are important for increasing visibility and access to supervisors and decision-makers, sharing informal knowledge

about the company, and demonstrating more of one's personality and " real self" outside of the workplace. Third, knowledge about a variety of mainstream, popular culture topics (i. e., being a " cultural omnivore") serves as an important form of cultural capital at Hays. Being conversant in a wide range of topics is necessary for getting along with co-workers and for navigating social interactions with supervisors and key decision-makers. Topics that dominate conversation at this company include sports, parenting/family issues, reality television shows, fashion, and exercise/nutrition. Whereas cultural capital research began with a focus on high-status culture in France (Bourdieu, 1984, 96), more recent in European settings confirms the importance of knowing something about a range of culture, particularly in regard to popular culture topics (Lizard, 2006, 81).

Possessing and activating cultural capital can lead to important advantages. Hays employees report that participating in the company's informal culture can help increase one's visibility and access to supervisors and decision-makers, a particularly important aspect for those in low-visibility positions or who report to an unsupportive supervisor. In addition, informal social activities serve as a setting where informal knowledge about the company is shared, and where employees have opportunities to bond and demonstrate more of their " real self" outside of work situations. In short, the company's informal culture realm is composed of sites where work gets done, introductions are made, impressions are formed, networks are expanded, and information is shared. Employees without the types of cultural capital valued at Hays fall behind.

CHAPTER 4:

# RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

## Overview

Based on my analysis of the data, I find a strong relationship between race

and cultural capital at Hays. This relationship varies by social class for

blacks: black employees are disadvantaged in cultural capital-related

processes at Hays, but the form of disadvantage depends on their class and

location in the company hierarchy. Middle-class blacks are disadvantaged

primarily in terms of activating the second and third forms of cultural capital

noted previously (participating in social events and being a cultural

omnivore), whereas working-class blacks tend to not possess the first form

(awareness of the importance of the company's informal culture). Whiteness,

on the other hand, is a clear advantage in terms of cultural capital at Hays.

## Middle-Class Blacks at Hays

Middle-class blacks at Hays possess cultural capital but face obstacles in its

activation. That is, middle-class black employees firmly understand the

importance of the company's sociocultural domain – the first type of cultural

capital described above but often feels unable to activate their cultural

capital. These employees are limited in their ability to activate cultural

capital by two related processes: (1) a white-dominated corporate culture

that requires assimilation in order to succeed; and (2) methods of exclusion

that are both overt and subtle. First, black middle-class employees feel that

to succeed at Hays they must assimilate to Hays's dominant corporate

culture – which, as I explain shortly, is dominated and maintained by whites

and cross a personal line that they are not willing to cross. Blacks must

assimilate primarily in terms of ways of interacting and communicating, as well as partaking of the sociocultural interests and activities that are preferred at the company. Subsequently, they feel that their social and cultural styles of interacting are not appreciated or rewarded at Hays. This result in a form of race-specific sociocultural exclusion that disadvantages black middle-class employees at the company, particularly in regard to the second form of cultural capital valued at Hays: the ability to participate in and navigate a range of informal social events.

Black middleclass employees defined assimilation in a variety of ways: being involved in work-related social outings rather than spending time with their families, eating lunch with people " that you really don't like, just because you know it's an important thing to do;" working out at the company gym; not challenging Hays'sleadership; interacting at work in a more restrained manner (which one participant explicitly noted as a " more white way" of acting, as opposed to black being " more emotional and outgoing"); modelling the actions and attitudes of the company's upper management; and steering clear of controversial social or political issues during discussions.

An older black, middle-class professional who works with outside clients – attributed the whiteness of Hays's culture to the fact that whites are clearly in the majority at the company. She noted that her department was completely white for years until she joined; she also commented that despite Hays's statedgoalsof diversity in her nine years there, that many departments are still mostly or completely white and that race " is not

equally distributed throughout the company." Other participants observed that Hays is no different than most other major corporations in this regard, and that this is simply the state of corporate England.

Significantly, some whites I interviewed echoed these sentiments as well, observing that their black peers have larger challenges than themselves in terms of interacting and fitting in with Hays's dominant culture. In short, there is a consensus that the valued cultural capital at Hays is dominated by the styles, attitudes, and preferences of white management, and those who wish to succeed must conform and blend in. This leaves black middle-class employees feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome in certain social settings at the company. Conversely, not one white participant noted feeling uncomfortable because of their race.

Second, black middle-class employees are often excluded from key sociocultural processes by both overt and subtle means. A black female worker went on to discuss the importance of cultural capital at Hays while also noting the mystery behind it, describing it as an " X-factor. She provides evidence that middle-class blacks are not only sometimes excluded from important cultural capital-related activities at Hays, but the substance and rules of the " X factor" are kept secret from them as well. She is interested in upward mobility in the company and is willing to do things (to a point) to advance, but is unsure of what is required in terms of the informal expectations. She knows there is a game to be played, but she is not told the informal rules and is not sure if she understands them correctly – hence, her ability to compete is hampered. What is particularly compelling about her is

that she struggles to learn the rules despite her background: she was raised in an upper-middle-class family by parents with graduate degrees and professional jobs, and her parents made a concerted effort to increase her general cultural capital by having her, for example, study abroad, take piano lessons, and learn to play tennis. Clearly, black middle class employees with less cultural and human capital than her might struggle even more.

The cultural capital framework has been criticized as simply another form of a deficit model, such as the " culture of poverty" argument, that can ultimately be used to blame the disadvantaged (Crompton, 2006, 85). However, this framework clearly considers the structural nature of the reproduction of inequality through its emphasis on power and exclusion. Middle-class blacks at Hays are not lacking in cultural capital – rather, they are often unable to activate these resources in the appropriate contexts, particularly the informal social settings I have found to be important, because they are excluded, either actively (i. e., simply not being invited or included) or covertly (i. e., being made to feel unwelcome).

The subtle, covert characteristic of these processes is particularly important to note, as very few of this study's black participants accused the company of outright racism or discrimination. Rather, they found the exclusion to be indistinct and often hard to put into words. This is precisely what makes cultural capital, with its emphasis on informal knowledge and expectations, such a difficult process of inequality to document, particularly for researchers who are not focused inside the workplace.

**Management: how are boundaries drawn?**

A careful distinction must be drawn in regard to how access to important informal knowledge is protected by those in power. At times, this knowledge is guarded proactively i. e., while white male managers at Hays have intentionally rebuffed a black female's efforts to join their social ranks, they invited a young white man to join their social and exercise circles. Although the race/gender calculus is not always simple – e. g., a white male participant complained to me about his exclusion as well – only black middle-class employees claimed race as a cause for their exclusion. At other times, informal knowledge remains off-limits through what I would describe as " benign neglect." That is, some managers simply assume that employees know the informal rules, and appear genuinely unaware that some individuals may not understand the importance of the informal culture. Thus, employees who understand and participate appropriately in Hays's informal culture are rewarded, and those who do not are assumed to be less interested in success and upward mobility. An executive management team member emphasized that the informal cultural rules and " fine line advice" are very important for success, but are also not openly explained. Jane agreed that blacks (and women) " have a tougher time" finding managers or mentors to explain the informal culture, largely because of the white male dominance of the culture, but she was unwilling to attribute these differences to racial discrimination or overt exclusion on the part of Hays managers. Rather, she believes that upper management's stated emphasis on diversity is genuine, but feels that they struggle with implementation. The company's ineffective diversity program leaves many managers uncertain as to what is required to help minority employees, or possibly unaware that

they need to do anything at all. (This issue is complicated by Hays's weak recruiting efforts for quality minority candidates, a complaint echoed by both black and white Hays managers.) Further, she feels that that white men are more likely to enter the company with some knowledge of the informal rules, leading white male managers to find it easier to work with them. Although she believes that blacks face more difficulties at Hays than whites, she believes that it is possible for blacks to succeed, especially if the company continues to refine and strengthen its efforts toward greater diversity.

A white male senior manager in his thirties is a prime example of the uncertainty and lack of awareness. He is " the future of the company" according to one executive I spoke with, and was promoted to one of the most visible positions in upper management during the course of this project. He has a reputation of being one of the most progressive, fair, and friendly members of upper management, and I found him to be engaging and sincere when discussing diversity and ascriptive inequality at Hays. Yet, as I will describe next, he was quite surprised by issues related to cultural capital and inequality that arose near the end of our formal interview. He recognized the importance of Hays's informal culture, but also argued that there are alternate means of connecting with or impressing managers.

Again, he seemed sincere in expressing his willingness to help and advice employees who are lower in the company's hierarchy. However, he was taken aback when I noted that lower-ranked employees might be hesitant to ask a high-ranking manager such as him for his time and advice. I explained that even with his positive reputation, employees might not be aware that it

is acceptable to ask a superior, especially one outside of his or her department, for help (this is an important form of cultural capital in the corporate sector). I also described my observations on why many black employees felt excluded or unwelcomed in Hays's informal culture, and thus felt uncomfortable approaching white managers without the connections and familiarity gained in those settings. He expressed his surprise over these observations, and vowed to do better in this regard, while asking for my advice on how he might proceed. Employees: an example of the " X factor"

The intangible aspects of social interactions can be difficult to discern and describe. Although black respondents gave a firm sense that black middle-class employees are made to feel excluded through various means, what remains unsaid is exactly how this exclusion occurs. What makes the black middle-class employees I interviewed feel unwelcome or excludedWhat are the verbal or nonverbal cues that signal their exclusionFirst, it is important to recall that cultural capital consists of a range of sociocultural behaviours, attitudes, and styles – for example, Bourdieu's early research identified how displaying certain styles of communicating and speaking favoured by middle-class teachers positively affected the educational outcomes of privileged students in France (Bourdieu, 1990, 85). Likewise, certain styles of communication are valued at Hays, and this provides a strong example of how blacks come to feel excluded or unwelcome at the company.

A certain manner of comportment is valued at Hays, and middle-class blacks feel that their willingness to speak frankly and challenge opinions harms them in this regard. All but one of the middle-class blacks in this study feel

that their frank, outspoken manner of communication is not received positively by white managers in the company. Ultimately, this impairs the ability of middle-class blacks to participate freely in informal sociocultural settings (the second form of valued cultural capital) and to display cultural omnivorism (the third form). While it is possible that white managers perceive the communication styles of middle-class blacks to be too assertive or not deferential enough, it appears more likely that middle-class blacks are simply going against the grain in terms of the company's predominant styles of communication. Thus, the communication styles of middle-class blacks, which might serve as capital in other settings, are not valued as cultural capital at Hays. This also serves as an example of how blacks feel they need to assimilate to succeed at the company.

These examples provide a glimpse into the mechanisms behind the exclusion of middle-class blacks at Hays. By possessing a communication style and orientation that is not favoured by the mostly white management, black middle-class employees are perceived as lacking in a key aspect of the dominant cultural capital at Hay: i. e., the manner in which successful, team oriented employees are expected to act.

**Working-Class Blacks at Hays**
Working-class blacks are disadvantaged at Hays, but for a different reason than their middle-class peers. These employees suffer from a lack of knowledge about the company's informal expectations and the importance of the sociocultural realm. The response of a young, black, working-class clerical worker – demonstrates this lack of awareness. She stated that she does not like to associate with co-workers outside of work and does not feel

the need to do. She recognizes that some of her co-workers may get involved in social activities in order to be seen, but does not feel that one needs to be active in sociocultural interactions in order to succeed. When I asked how she plans to advance at Hays, she responded by describing traditional means of doing so: throughhard workand possibly taking college-level classes or additional training; getting more involved in the company's sociocultural realm was not part of her plan.

Black working-class employees are further disadvantaged by working in primarily radicalised jobs that are segregated socially and physically from the company's mainstream. As described earlier, Hays displays the job segregation patterns typical of large corporations: most of the black employees are in lower-ranked positions, including a large call center that is mostly black and is located in a separate facility from the rest of Hays's main offices; these positions are clearly radicalised. Thus, not only are working-class black employees unaware of the importance of Hays's informal culture, but they are also less likely than other employees to come into contact with potential mentors or guides, or to be in sites where they can learn by following the examples of others. To be clear, it is difficult to decompose the effects of race and class on this issue, as I lack a clear comparison group to my working-class black participants. I was only able to interview three whites in lower-ranked positions (i. e., in the bottom one-third of the company's hierarchy); all three are women. Two of the three do not have college degrees, but are from middle-class backgrounds, have educated spouses, and appear to be middle-class in the present; the third is from a working-class background, but has a college degree, and is far well-versed in social

and cultural issues than the black working-class participants. Also, as opposed to blacks working in radicalised, dead-end positions, whites who have lower-ranked positions often have college degrees, and have either a clear plan for advancement or are not interested in upward mobility because they seek a low-stressjob with fewer demands.

**White Employees at Hays**

To this point, I have focused my attention on the circumstances of black employees at Hays. This is due mainly to my finding no evidence whatsoever of whites being disadvantaged in the possession or activation of cultural capital because of race. Other factors outside of the focus of this dissertation such as gender, class, work/family conflicts, and sexual orientation sometimes prohibit white Hays employees from succeeding in cultural capital-related processes, but not the colour of their skin.

The majority of this study's white participants claimed that race does not matter, with many following up this claim to add that Hays's diversity efforts insure that blacks get a fair shake. Very few whites acknowledged that whites have an advantage at the company. These views those are typical of whites, who generally do not recognize the privileges that accompany the colour of their skin (Bonilla-Silva, 2003, 471). Some whites interpreted my question, " how does race matter at Hay?" in negative terms, pointing to " diversity candidates" who did not perform as strongly as their white counterparts. Further, some felt that Hays goes too far with emphasis on diversity.

However, whiteness is clearly an advantage at the company. Claims by whites that race does not matter at Hays are countered by the responses of black employees and some white managers, as well as the reality that management at the middle and upper levels is heavily dominated by whites. Only one of Hays's 11 senior executives is black; out of roughly 20 to 25 executives at the next step down of upper management (vice-president and senior-vice-president positions), just one is black. As noted earlier, roughly 95% of Hays's professional jobs are occupied by whites. A white senior executive commented on the difficulties blacks face at Hays (while also noting the combined effects of race and gender).

**Experiencing Hays's White-Dominated Culture**

In sum, Hays's white-collar sector and leadership are predominantly white, and although some white respondents claim that race has no effect at the company, other whites, including some in middle and executive management, recognize that Hays's culture is dominated by the cultural attitudes, styles, and preferences of whites. But what does this mean in terms of lived experienceHow is this " white-dominated culture" experienced by employeesMy participant observations experiences help illustrate the whiteness of Hays's culture. Significantly, every informal company outing I participated in took place in settings that were overwhelmingly white in terms of their geographic location and crowd. These social outings occurred in bars or restaurants in three parts of the large metropolitan area where Hays is located: the white, upper-middle-class suburb in which Hays's offices reside; the downtown business district area; and Parktown, an affluent neighbourhood located within the city limits that is populated primarily by

white, young professionals. The bars and restaurants tended to be moderately upscale and were populated mostly with young professionals dressed in the business casual clothes they wore to work (if it was a happy hour) or nicer casual clothes (no t-shirts and jeans) if we met later in the evening. The crowds in these establishments, generally 50-100 people on average, were usually almost completely white – in fact, when black Hays employees were there, they were frequently the only non-whites there.

It is true that many of the cultural topics that are discussed at Hays's informal gatherings reality TV shows, family events, and the local professional and college sports teams are not clearly radicalised; although as a recent ESPN/ABC News poll showed, even seemingly benign topics, such as black professional baseball player Barry Bonds' chase of the career home run record, can engender a racial divide (ESPN. com, 2010). But it is also true that cultural products, artists, and interests more associated with black culture – including even well-known, more mainstream examples such as Jay-Z (hip-hop), Wynton Marsalis (jazz), Dave Chapelle (comedy), or an entire league such as the National Basketball Association – are less likely to be discussed (and viewed as a form of cultural capital) in Hays's informal sociocultural settings. Jay-Z may be more famous and artistically relevant than white singer Dave Matthews, but the latter is certainly more likely to come up in conversation in these settings.

It is not as if blacks at Hays are particularly surprised by the company's culture: many made comments along the lines of " it's corporate world, its white, and it's what you would expect." But they also continue to sometimes

feel alienated in this culture, a feeling that is exacerbated by the company's ham-fisted attempts at promoting diversity (such as featuring black-eyed peas, cornbread, and other traditional African-American dishes during specific festivals and their white co-workers' apparent unwillingness to meet them halfway and learn more about, for example, black authors or performers. The " default whiteness" of Hays's informal culture becomes tiring. In short, blacks' feelings of alienation – combined with whites' numerical dominance at Hays and the tendency to host informal gatherings in exceedingly white settings – produce a level of social distance and strain that whites do not have to negotiate on a daily basis at Hays. This is a classic example of white privilege (McIntosh, 2001, 101): Hays's whites simply do not have to be concerned with their race, while blacks are confronted with it on a regular basis, particularly in the company's informal culture. It also lends support to Bonilla-Silva's notion of a white habitus, a radicalised socialization process, caused by whites' social and spatial isolation that influences whites' perceptions and feelings about racial matters. Whites do not have to face or even recognize the reality of being the only person of their race in a pub, a pub one feels to be compelled to be in for work reasons; blacks do. Nearly every employee at Hays has impediments that keep them from participating in the informal culture as much they might want or need to. As I noted above, participants noted how gender, class, work-family commitments, and sexual orientation all affect their ability to participate in Hays's informal culture. Race is clearly important in this regard, and thus, whites at Hays have one less significant barrier to negotiate than blacks while navigating the informal sociocultural settings

that are important for success and mobility at the company. This barrier reflects a dynamic that Hays's diversity efforts are not equipped to address, thus leaving quite a gap between the company's stated goals and the reality of its culture.

It is important to note that in Hays's informal culture, the conversion of cultural capital into actual benefits or resources (e. g., a new node in one's work network, information gained about an important new project, an opportunity to impress a member of upper management) is rarely instantaneous. In other words, discussing the Chicago Bears with an executive will seldom result in an immediate promotion. Instead, conversion is an ongoing process requiring repeated displays of cultural capital in front of decision-makers or key peers at strategic moments. In this sense, Hays's black middle-class employees are disadvantaged by their diminished presence and involvement in the company's informal culture, which is due to overt exclusion or their reluctance to participate in an uninviting social context. Notably, I observed black middle-class employees participating in Hays's informal social outings, but rarely with the frequency and duration of the whites who were most successful at activating their cultural capital and " playing the game." Consequently, Hays's black middle-class employees continued to be disadvantaged in this regard. Previous research has suggested that whiteness may be a cultural resource whites can draw upon in certain contexts (Reeves, 2001, 112), and that race affects the cultural capital that is valued in adult work contexts (Kaplan, 2006, 151). This study's findings provide further evidence for the influence of race on cultural capital, a resource that has previously been explored almost exclusively in terms of

social class. I find that whites determine the cultural knowledge, styles, behaviours, and attitudes that are favoured at Hays, and that the whiteness of Hays's culture clearly disadvantages blacks in terms of activating cultural capital.

**Discussion**

In this dissertation, I used data from interviews and participant-observations to demonstrate that cultural capital theory is a useful theoretical framework for inquiry into racial inequality. By situating this study in an institutional context such as the headquarters of a major corporation, I was able to first identify the forms of cultural capital valued in this context, and then examine how race affects the possession and activation of this form of capital. In doing so, I demonstrated how cultural capital theory allows for considerations of both structure and agency.

I found that black corporate employees are disadvantaged in terms of cultural capital, and that the form of disadvantage varies by class. Middle-class black employees are limited in their ability to activate their cultural capital by working in a corporate culture that is defined and dominated by whites, and that necessitates their assimilation in exchange for success. Black middle-class workers are also excluded from important sites where cultural capital is activated through means of exclusion that are sometimes subtle, other times overt. Working-class blacks, on the other hand, are disadvantaged in the possession of cultural capital, particularly in regard to knowledge about the company's informal culture and rules. It's a classic case of " not knowing what you don't know" – i. e., these workers are mostly unaware of the importance of participating in Hays's informal culture. I also

found no evidence that whites are disadvantaged in cultural capital sites and processes because of race; rather, whites are clearly advantaged in this regard in the corporate setting. Some critics of the cultural capital model have argued that it is simply another way to blame the disadvantaged, similar to the manner in which the " culture of poverty" arguments were used to blame poor, urban blacks. This criticism, however, overlooks the structural aspects of this theoretical framework: cultural capital is used by the dominant group in a particular setting to exclude others and preserve rewards for others like them. In Hays's case, white members of middle and upper management define the cultural capital valued at the company. The success of blacks' efforts at agency hinges, in large part, on their ability to traverse and negotiate this white dominated cultural structure. While the majority of cultural capital research has focused on the role of class in exclusionary processes, this paper shows that race is a factor as well.

Some would argue, for example, that Hays's middle-class blacks are to blame for not being willing to " cross the line" and do whatever it takes to be successful. But this also begs the question of why and how workers are evaluated for non-performance issues – that is, a meritocratic institution such as the workplace claims to reward workers for their quantifiable performance, and not for how they behave at a happy hour, blend in to the organization's culture, or demonstrate knowledge about sports. The black middle-class workers I interviewed are regarded as solid performers and, in some cases, were openly recruited by Hays's management. If an employee's performance is adequate or better, why should she or he be forced into participate in sociocultural situations in which s/he is not comfortable or feels

excludedWhite employees do not face this dilemma, at least for racial reasons – black employees do.

It is interesting to consider the effects the white-dominated culture has on white managers. I provided evidence that while some managers may not have malicious or exclusionary intentions; the reality is that they are ill-equipped to recognize how their whiteness affects their decision making and evaluations as they apply to Hays's informal culture. White managers are also unaware that some employees – black employees, in this case – may struggle with cultural capital at the company. This leads to a profound gap between Hays's stated emphasis on diversity and the reality as it exists within the company. As such, this echoes Reskin's contention that sociologists concerned with inequality should focus on the internal mechanisms that generate inequality rather than the motives of those in charge. In short, the motives of managers appear to matter less than the embedded culture of the company.

Regardless, it is important to ask why company managers do not take a more active role in mentoring the working-class individuals who report to them, particularly when they are keenly aware, at least in some cases, that these workers do not " know the rules." Black working-class employees are further disadvantaged at Hays by working primarily radicalised jobs that are segregated socially and physically from the company's mainstream. Not only are they unaware of the importance of the company's informal culture, but they are less likely than others to come into contact with fellow employees who may guide or mentor them, or to be in sites where they learn by

example, because of job-level segregation. It is important to note that most employees, both black and white, feel that Hays provides a positiveenvironmentand is a good place to work. It seems fair to say that even Hays's harshest critics are driven not by a disapproval of the company, but rather by frustrations over wasted potential – this is particularly true in r