Article

# Maintaining Hierarchies in Predominantly White Organizations: A Theory of Racial Tasks

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### Abstract

Predominantly White workplaces are environments in which Whiteness is privileged in numerous ways. Studies show workers of color doing self-presentation, emotion work, and other forms of social interaction intended to help ease the difficulties associated with being in the minority. In addition to the expectation that they smooth interactions with White peers, workers of color are assigned positions and tasks which reinforce that racial status quo. In this theoretical article, we attempt to place these various processes under an umbrella term we define as "racial tasks." We examine the ideological, interactional, and physical labor racial minorities perform in mostly White work settings, and the ways these racial tasks vary at different levels of the organizational structure. We consider the ways that the tactics and requirements associated with racial tasks maintain the racial hierarchy of predominantly White organizations and conclude by examining the implications of this work for racial minorities.

### Keywords

relational, workplace, racial tasks

Sociological research has been adept at highlighting ways that labor markets and workplaces, far from being neutral, objective structures, can actually serve to per-petuate various forms of inequality. In particular, one of the key ways that markets and work settings do this is through differential treatment of Whites and people of color. Factors such as employer preferences, structural discrimination, job queues,

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differential access to social networks, and other issues collectively work to create stark racial disparities (Kirschenman & Neckerman, 1991; Reskin & Roos, 1991; Roscigno, 2007; Royster, 2003). As a consequence, racial minorities are often concentrated into lower paying jobs and are sparsely represented among the higher status, more influential positions within organizations and in professions more broadly (Acker, 2006; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993; Wilson, 1997). Thus, structural and organizational patterns become one way that racial hierarchies are perpetuated in work settings.

While we have many examples of racial incidents at work, there are few theoretical arguments offered that make sense of why such instances occur. In other words, research provides clear evidence of racial imbalances in predominantly White work settings, but sociologists who study work and race generally lack a theoretical apparatus designed to connect the organizational structure of the workplace to the cultural and social practices within that serve to reproduce racial inequality. We attempt to address this here by emphasizing the ways that the job requirements and implicit responsibilities associated with work at different levels of the organizational hierarchy are imbued with racialized meanings that affect the practices, behaviors, and actions that occur within the organization. We describe the work that is done in this context as *racial tasks* that ultimately operate to preserve and uphold Whites' advantage in work settings. As such, we explore the ways that organizational hierarchies extend to unspoken racialized practices that inform and are embedded within racial minorities' work in predominantly White settings.

## Theoretical Underpinnings of Racial Tasks

Researchers have long noted that organizational structures produce hierarchies and reinforce status inequalities. Within organizations, particularly workplaces, the routine patterns, practices, and expectations that are present can often serve to perpetuate certain groups' advantages over others. Joan Acker (1990) provides a particularly important case of the way this occurs within organizations wherein assumptions, beliefs, and ideologies are wedded to organizational practices that reproduce gendered patterns. Specifically, Acker's (1990) theory asserts that organizations are gendered structures that implicitly hold expectations about which workers are best suited for certain jobs, thus establishing men as natural, ideal workers. Other research has further developed this theoretical argument to find that as organizations "gender" certain occupations, men are often slotted into the jobs that tend to be better paying and hold higher status (Britton, 2003; Pierce, 2012). Women face difficulties attempting to access and perform in these jobs and are often channeled into "female" positions that are considered more suitable and acceptable for them. Consequently, a great deal of research on gender and work has shown that organizations tacitly establish hierarchies wherein men are rewarded with access to better jobs.

In this article, we consider the ways organizational practices, expectations, and assumptions also serve to reproduce racial hierarchies. Within predominantly White

| Organizational Level of Worker | Type of Work | Racial Tasks |
|---|---|---|
| Elites (COOs, upper level administrators, law firm partners) | Mostly Ideological Some Interactional | Creating organizational norms, culture |
| Middle level workers (middle management, low level administrators, nurses, professors) | Mostly Interactional Some Ideological | Upholding/conforming to organizational norms, culture<br>Diversity management<br>Buffering<br>Self-presentation, emotional labor |
| Low level workers (janitorial and custodial staff, maintenance) | Mostly Physical Some Interactional | Building, maintaining, and securing the physical space that houses the institutional and ideological racial tasks of upper level workers<br>Physical distancing |

**Figure 1.** A model of racial tasks.

organizations (e.g., many law firms, universities, financial institutions) there are many employees, often of different races. However, Whites tend to be concentrated at the top levels of these organizations (in CEO, director, president, and other senior administrative positions). Some minorities can and do reach these levels, but those who do may find that the rewards associated with this ascent may be negligible, as they are likely to have less responsibility than Whites, supervise primarily other racial minorities, and/or find themselves tracked into submarkets that mostly address racialized concerns (Collins, 1997; Durr & Logan, 1997; Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993). People of color are more likely to be scattered through the middle levels (as faculty, associates, and middle managers) and overrepresented at the bottom tiers (in custodial services, administrative support staff, or security work). We seek here to provide a theoretical argument that helps to explain the sorts of racial challenges many workers of color document when employed in these predominantly White workplaces (see, e.g., Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Jackson, Thoits, & Taylor, 1995; Roscigno, 2007) by emphasizing the ways in which organizational structures reproduce racialized hierarchies through everyday practices.

## Carrying Out Racial Tasks

We have defined racial tasks broadly as the work minorities do that is associated with their position in the organizational hierarchy and reinforces Whites' position of power within the workplace. Here, we develop this idea more fully. We argue that racial tasks are present at three levels—ideological, interactional, and physical—and occur in a myriad of ways at each level (see Figure 1). At the *ideological* level, racial tasks involve establishing and/or maintaining an organizational culture that is normatively White and middle class. This labor is mostly done by those at the top level of the

organizational hierarchy—CEOs, COOs, upper-level administrators. As such, racial tasks at this level actively serve to build and/or establish a culture wherein Whiteness is normalized and treated as standard. In *interactions*, racial tasks are the routine self-presentation and emotion work done to uphold Whites' dominant position in the workplace. Workers at the middle level of organizations—midlevel managers, lower-level administrators—are likely to do much of this labor. At the interactional level, the process of completing racial tasks means that through everyday practices and basic interactions, workers are conforming to norms that have already been set. They also fulfill ideological racial tasks, though in a different capacity than those at the uppermost levels of the institution. These employees are likely to do the ideological racial tasks of upholding, conforming to, and enforcing the organizational culture and norms established by those at the top. Finally, racial tasks also occur in a *physical* form, when workers are responsible for constructing and/or maintaining the infrastructure where the ideological and institutional forms of racial tasks ensue. This type of labor also includes physical, nonverbal communication, decoration, and spatial organization. Most employees responsible for the physical form of racial tasks will work at the lowest tiers of the organization as maintenance or service workers.

## Racial Tasks at the Ideological Level

Racial tasks include the work that is done to perpetuate the ideological and cultural norms that uphold racial hierarchies in the work environment. Anderson (1999) describes most professional work environments as normatively White, middle-class cultures. We would venture that this extends beyond professional settings to shape many work cultures more generally, wherein "professionalism" becomes tacitly understood as synonymous with Whiteness (see Wingfield, 2010, for examples). Furthermore, building on Acker's (2006, p. 112) contention that "decisions about goals, locations, technologies, and investments are made at the top," we argue that those at the top levels of organizations are directly able to set or change the organizational culture and are able to do so more directly than employees at the middle or lower tiers. Minority workers who establish the organizational culture of a work environment (the upper-level administrators, CEOs, and top tier management) are completing an ideological type of racial task that upholds cultural norms that value and idealize Whiteness.

Employees at the very top levels of an organization are likely to be predominantly White (Acker, 2006). As Zweigenhaft and Domhoff (2003) have established, very few workers of color make it to the top ranks of organizational structures due to a variety of systemic and institutional factors. Those who do reach this stratum are likely to be the only one at that level. We argue that these low numbers put these minority workers in a position where they must still do the ideological racial tasks of working to construct and maintain an organizational culture that privileges Whiteness. Workers in this situation may be given the responsibility of managing diversity programs, special training and internship programs for workers of color, and other requirements that are seen as the appropriate domain for workers of color. Although they may have the ability to influence organizational culture as it relates to diversity, top-level workers of

color are faced with the pressure of maintaining the organizational culture that privileges Whiteness. However, we theorize that the power that accompanies their high-ranking positions means that they are freed from doing some, but not all, of the interactional racial tasks expected of workers lower down the ladder. This is not to say that workers at these top levels are completely exempt from this interactional labor, but that their positions at the top of the organizational hierarchy offer them the ability to do less of this than workers of color at the middle levels.

Collins (1997) describes this sort of work in her study of Black executives in the corporate world. She identifies Black managers in diversity-related positions as peace-keepers, crisis managers and conciliators who often have the responsibility of serving as a buffer between mostly White organizations and minority constituencies. Collins (1997) identifies this as "racialized labor," highlighting the ways that Black executives are called on—and often exclusively hired—to address concerns related to minority constituents. Collins (1997) notes that the prevalence and availability of these jobs is largely linked to the political economy and broader societal support for these sorts of jobs; as such, these positions may be diminishing in a present day era where color-blindness is the preferred ideological outlook. However, workers who still hold these jobs may find themselves doing ideological racial tasks of upholding the organization's image as a fair and equitable environment despite any racialized practices that may occur to undermine this. In addition to the racialized labor that Collins (1997) describes of having to address minority group concerns, we argue that at this level workers are also required to help set a racialized ideological culture. Thus, these employees may be responsible for the ideological task of maintaining an organizational culture that obscures or minimizes the challenges facing minority workers.

A similar example could be constructed in other organizational settings. Within law firms, partners tend to be those responsible for establishing the culture. In most firms, the majority of partners are also White men, though some racial minority men and women of any race can also be counted among these ranks (Pierce, 2012). If, in a large firm, partners make it a point to find or retain attorneys who will strengthen their corporate law division (which would service mostly large White-owned companies) over their civil rights/antidiscrimination division (which would presumably provide services mostly to communities of color), such actions help to reinforce what sort of ideological production is valued by the firm. Hiring choices, then, are imbued with additional meaning: In addition to being the basic responsibility of workers in the firm, they are a form of racial task wherein partners reinforce the ideological dynamics that retain racial hierarchies and values within the firm. Hiring decisions thus become an example of an organizational practice that preserves an ideology that maintains racial hierarchies.

In a recent study, Jennifer Pierce (2012) gives some additional examples of how organizational culture is implicitly racialized in law firms. She analyzes the present-day reactions to affirmative action within a large firm, and finds that many White male attorneys embrace a narrative of unqualified, undeserving minorities who have secured jobs within the legal field that they did not truly earn or deserve. Notably, Pierce (2012) contends that White women have actually been the greatest beneficiaries of

affirmative action, but that the issue has been raced and gendered in such a way that racial minority men and women, particularly Black Americans, are seen as unduly "taking jobs" from more deserving White males.

Pierce's (2012) work reveals that White male attorneys are able to establish a culture within the organization where Whites—White men in particular—are tacitly cast as the most suited for the high-status legal work performed in private firms. In addition, this culture presents Black Americans as people who, even when employed by the firm, do not truly deserve to be there. As Pierce (2012) notes, White male elites use institutional memory, gossip about Black workers, and reliance on broader cultural narratives as tools to institute an organizational culture that preserves White males' advantages in the firm. Yet, even when they attain partnership status, workers of color in the organization must still do the racial tasks of perpetuating this organizational culture and even more, presenting the firm as an equitable workplace.

When those at the top levels of organizations carry out racial tasks at the ideological level through their efforts to establish an organizational culture, this has an impact on workers at other levels of the organization as well. While workers at the middle levels do not have the same agency and ability to determine organizational norms, they are expected to follow the norms that have been set. Thus, these employees do the labor of conforming to the ideological norms that have been established. As such, Asian American workers who take pains not to speak with any trace of an accent are engaging in racial tasks at the ideological level (Chou & Feagin, 2006). Black women employees who straighten their hair to fit into professional work environments also are engaging in an especially common ideological racial task (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). In these examples, both Asian American and Black women employees are doing the work that maintains the organizational culture and ideological norms that privilege Whiteness. These actions do not necessarily involve direct interaction with others in the workplace (hence they are not classified at the interactional level), but they are additional forms of labor that establish the organizational culture of the workplace as a space where Whiteness is normal, mainstream, and centralized.

## Racial Tasks at the Interactional Level

Social interactions at work are always key, but for minority workers they can take on outsize importance. Like Collins (1997), Wilson and his colleagues have noted that racial dynamics function to Black employees' disadvantage in a variety of ways. Studying various aspects of work including layoffs and promotions, Wilson and his colleagues find that Black workers are typically given less authority and responsibility than their White peers, a fact that limits them when it comes to promotions and makes them more vulnerable when layoffs occur. Because Black employees are more likely to supervise other racial minorities, have less authority, and perform more narrowly described tasks, they must demonstrate their suitability for leadership positions more directly than White colleagues. Though he does not use Collins's (1997) specific term of racialized labor, Wilson (1997; Wilson & McBrier, 2005) nonetheless identifies

another aspect of the additional work ascribed to Black employees in that their accomplishments are not given the same weight, credence, and indicator of future performance as their White colleagues.

We argue here that our concept of racial tasks explains another dimension of the occupational responsibilities expected of minority workers through basic, everyday interactions. Researchers have noted that Black workers in predominantly White settings must do particular work to prove their capabilities for promotion (Wilson, 1997), avoid layoffs (Wilson & McBrier, 2005), and otherwise avoid processes of status closure (Tomaskovic-Devey, 1993) and discrimination (Roscigno, 2007) that would marginalize them and preclude them from accessing high-status positions. Social interactions thus take on critical importance as a site where Black workers—and presumably, minority employees more generally—face a unique opportunity to demonstrate "soft skills" such as personability, geniality, and positivity that can be interpreted as evidence of their capabilities and suitability for promotion to higher status jobs (Moss & Tilly, 1996). Our theoretical contribution offers a departure from existing studies in that we seek to emphasize the unspoken racialized dynamics that are embedded in these everyday interactions and connect them to organizational structures and the hierarchies that are implicit within them.

In interactions with others, racial tasks involve the self-presentation, emotion work, and/or behaviors that are necessary for upholding the racialized power dynamics in predominantly White organizations. When Black workers laugh at racist jokes to ingratiate themselves to White colleagues or restrain themselves from showing anger because it makes White supervisors uncomfortable, these are examples of racial tasks occurring through interactions (Bolton & Feagin, 2004; Wingfield, 2010). Racial tasks in interactions also involves demonstrating capabilities and competence, as Lopez (2008) indicates in her study of Chicana lawyers, "You do get a lot more questions regarding your ability—they [White men and women] are constantly testing you" (p. 600). When these trained lawyers must answer questions to prove their knowledge and capability in their field, they too are engaging in racial tasks. Through their social interactions in the workplace, they are doing labor that underscores racial hierarchies present within the organization. Doing the work of proving one's capabilities and feigning or hiding emotions about race-related situations is a part of everyday social interaction for minority workers, and one that contributes to Whites' advantage within the organization.

At the middle level of the organization, there are likely to be more employees of color than at the top, though they generally will remain in the minority. Here, we refer to the managers, associates, and professional and semiprofessional workers who constitute the middle tier of an organization's structure. In the university, these would be the professors, senior staff, and low-level administrators. In a banking center, these employees would include the tellers, managers, and loan officers in a particular branch. These are the workers who are not in positions of power that enable them to set the organizational culture or make major institutional change, but they may still retain occupational positions with varying degrees of influence, status, and prestige within and outside of the work setting.

Due to their relatively small numbers and their position in the organization, midlevel workers of color will have to interact primarily with White colleagues, but will not have the agency and ability to establish organizational culture. Consequently, employees at this level are likely to engage in racial tasks during their everyday interactions—in meetings, conferring with colleagues, and so forth. In the case of these employees, we theorize that their racial tasks will mostly consist of the work done during daily, routine interactions that maintains Whites' privilege and advantage within these spaces—ensuring that Whites feel comfortable with them, keeping silent when confronted with expressions of racial bias (Feagin & Sikes, 1995; Wingfield, 2010). As such, midlevel workers will be more likely to do the emotional labor and self-presentation that compose racial tasks at the interactional level than they are to carry out racial tasks at the ideological or physical level.

Midlevel workers, especially managers, are those most likely to make routine human resource decisions, such as hiring, promotion, termination and training. This responsibility is delegated from organizational elites who establish organizational culture. Midlevel workers interact with potential and current employees to select, promote, and modify behavior appropriate within the organization. As with workers of color at the top levels, diversity work is an important part of the way midlevel workers uphold organizational norms and culture. Following the lead of those at the upper levels of the organization, midlevel workers of color may take on the tasks of easing racial tensions and interpreting and repackaging directives from the top that maintain racial hierarchies in place in the organization.

These midlevel workers may also do some racial tasks that uphold the ideological norms of the organization, but it is critical to point out that they will do so in a different fashion than their supervisors who are higher up the occupational ladder. Following from the previous example of racial labor in a law firm, this means that the attorney hired to do corporate law will produce ideological work that upholds the firm's broader commitment to White corporate interests over those of disadvantaged people of color. However, this attorney is ultimately following more powerful employers' leads in constructing the ideological direction of the firm.

Midlevel workers' ideological racial tasks may also take other forms such as the maintenance of a "professional atmosphere." This would include selecting television stations and music for reception areas (e.g., CNN Headline News vs. Fox News, a top 40 radio station vs. a classical radio station) and monitoring employees for "inappropriate" conversations and dress. Midlevel workers are given the authority to make these decisions, but their decisions must reflect the wishes of elite workers.

## Racial Tasks at the Physical Level

Finally, racial tasks also include the work done that constructs physical space in a way that privileges Whiteness. Men of color who work construction may perform racial tasks on multiple fronts: Their work may include trying to conform to White cultural norms of the construction business as well as the physical labor of erecting sites that may themselves become spaces where racial labor is performed (Paap, 2006). As

Loewen (1999) notes, the existence of buildings or statues named for and dedicated to segregationists, Civil War generals, or military officials involved in massacres of Native Americans sends a clear racialized messages about which groups are valued and prioritized in certain spaces and institutions. The literal physical structure of an organization where buildings or rooms are named for individuals who openly touted segregationist platforms and advocated racial inequality subtly serves to privilege Whiteness in an unspoken way. Thus, racial tasks can take a physical form when they include efforts to build, shape, and maintain the organizational structure.

Workers at the bottom rungs of the organizational ladder will be those charged with doing racial tasks in their physical form. We theorize that very rarely, if ever, will mid- and upper-level employees be responsible for actually constructing or preserving the organization's physical infrastructure. These tasks will fall to workers at the lowest levels of the organizational hierarchy—the janitorial staff, maintenance workers, and so forth. Not coincidentally, this is the level of the organization where people of color are most likely to be overrepresented. Thus, most of these employees will carry out racial tasks that involve protecting, servicing, and caring for the tangible physical structure in which other, higher-status workers do the interactional and ideological forms of racial labor.

Tasks related to decorating and maintaining the physical work space are often the domain of workers at the bottom of the organizational structure. Decisions about decor, including the types of art and company advertisements displayed, are part of the ideological racial tasks of the elite workers. However, low-level workers are responsible for carrying out decisions about the physical environment. In a real estate office, for example, the person responsible for hanging photography featuring smiling, White, nuclear families in front of large suburban homes is not able to comment as to whether the art is reflective of the clientele of the business. This worker is simply responsible for carrying out the directive to hang the photograph. Low-level workers are often put in positions to support the creation and maintenance of organizations that then demand racial tasks from employees.

Another aspect of protecting, servicing, and caring for the physical structure of the organization is the provision of security. Security personnel are more likely to be people of color. They literally are required to use their bodies as a physical barrier between those for whom the space was created and those who do not belong. Essentially, security and reception personnel are the gatekeepers to these organizational structures. This gatekeeping function inevitably has a raced component. Potential entrants to the space are screened such that people who do not fit the profile of the organization are excluded. Those who tend to be excluded from the space often share racial and socioeconomic characteristics with the security and reception staff. Despite this, security and reception staff must blend physical and interactional racial tasks to perform the gate keeping function.

Racial tasks at the physical level also include maintaining the physical distinction between lower-level workers from mid- and upper-level workers in the organizational structure. This labor comprises workers at this level meeting the expectation that they remain minimally engaged with other employees as well as clients and customers,

limiting interaction with other people operating within the organization to what is required to perform the gatekeeping function, or tasks related to physical maintenance of the building. Whereas workers performing the gatekeeping function use the visibility of their bodies to restrict access to the physical space, workers performing other physical kinds of labor must do so while maintaining the invisibility of their bodies to clients and even to other workers. This type of physical racial task entails workers at the lower end of the hierarchy performing their work in spaces and at times designed to restrict these workers' visibility. When the preferred invisibility is impossible to maintain, workers performing physical racial tasks must move their bodies in such a way that makes it the work they do appear inconspicuous. For instance, janitorial work is usually done outside of work hours, but when janitorial responsibilities need to be performed during work hours, workers are expected to do so quickly and with minimal interruption to higher-level workers.

Physical distinction between low-level workers and higher-level workers is achieved through both physical and interactional racial tasks on the part of low-level workers, as well as the physical design of the workspace. Low-level workers usually occupy separate break rooms and workspace from workers who perform more prestigious tasks within the organization. These spaces are often hidden in basements and other low-visibility locations in the workspace. The confinement of low-level workers, who are more likely to be people of color, to designated spaces with limited visibility serves to reinforce the organization as a White space.

## Conclusion: The Impact of Racial Tasks

In introducing and defining the concept of racial tasks, we have attempted to show the ways that this is connected to organizational practices such as establishing organizational culture, hiring, demonstrating skills and qualifications, and even the basic physical construction of the work space. We have also argued that racial tasks vary depending on employees' position within the organizational structure. Basic organizational practices and norms, then, are guided by racialized assumptions that create certain expectations for workers of color and maintain racial hierarchies. Though workers of all races in an organizational structure may engage in this type of labor, it takes its most pronounced toll on minority employees since they must work harder to conform to ideological, institutional, and physical norms that privilege Whiteness.

By drawing attention to the concept of racial tasks, it is possible to highlight ways that workplaces create additional stratification and racial inequality between White workers and those of color. When employees of color at the uppermost, middle, and lower levels of an organization undertake the additional work of racial labor, they are engaging in efforts that uphold the institutional norms and practices that keep these spaces relatively unwelcoming for minority workers and more hospitable for Whites. Workers of color who engage in racial tasks are doing work that creates a certain organizational climate, but also serves to maintain a racially unequal power structure. Given that racial tasks are linked to the expectations associated with workers at different places within the organizational hierarchy, even workers at the top levels of the

institution will still encounter racialized expectations and assumptions that can be detrimental to their work experience.

Related to this, the theory of racial tasks can also help explain some of the social and structural impediments to occupational ascension that exist for minority workers. Inasmuch as Black employees' paths to promotion rest not only on objective criteria such as work performance, they—more so than their White peers—must also demonstrate soft skills such as personality and professionalism to offset discriminatory practices and be seriously considered for promotion (Moss & Tilly, 1996; Roscigno, 2007; Wilson & McBrier, 2005). We argue here that the presentation of these soft skills constitutes an example of racial tasks at the interactional level, but also that this constitutes a bias against workers of color that is inherent within organizations. In other words, within the organizational hierarchy, midlevel workers of color may be judged and evaluated based not just on their performance, but must also engage in emotion work, show their soft skills, and do impression management. We contend that these interactional processes are expected of minority workers at this level of the organization and compose institutional barriers to promotion and upward mobility.

For workers at the bottom tier of the organizational ladder, the racial tasks they are expected to do render them even less likely to be promoted to the highest-status, most influential positions. As we have noted, jobs at this level include security, janitorial, and maintenance work, and are more likely to be filled by people of color than are jobs at the middle or upper levels of the organization. Implicit in these jobs are racial tasks in the physical form, which can involve gatekeeping, establishing a racialized decor, and generally creating infrastructures and spaces that normalize and privilege Whiteness. Thus, organizational hierarchies help maintain racial stratification at work, inasmuch as workers of color are disproportionately likely to be found in jobs that require the more physical forms of racial tasks.

The theory of racial tasks also sheds light on the tacit, covert processes by which White workers may unwittingly persist in making the workplace an uncomfortable or even hostile space for employees of color. After all, White workers' expectations of racial tasks in the form of self-presentation, behavioral adjustments, and emotion work from their minority colleagues ultimately creates additional demands for workers of color. Theoretically, racial tasks can also facilitate the sense of isolation and marginalization many minority workers describe in predominantly White settings (Feagin & Sikes, 1995).

The theory of racial tasks thus also serves to further our understanding of the ways that race operates in the workplace in ways that differ from the mechanisms that maintain gender inequality. As Acker (1990, 2006) notes, the gendered nature of organizations (and jobs) often serve to highlight and in some cases artificially inflate the supposed differences between men and women. Jobs such as construction worker, truck driver, and correctional officer are conceptualized as men's jobs, while jobs such as nursing and teaching are gendered female (Britton, 2003; Paap, 2006; Williams, 1995). This process helps to maintain inequality by emphasizing the perceived gender differences in who is best suited for various types of work. When it comes to racial

tasks, however, many employees of color must do work that serves to smooth over and conceal perceptions of racial difference. Embedded in the everyday interactions, development of organizational culture, and physical construction and maintenance of work sites is the labor that minority workers do to maintain the normalization of Whiteness and to smooth over or conceal racial diversity. We argue here that while gendered organizations entrench assumed divisions between men and women vis-à-vis constructions of work, racial tasks push workers of color to display cultural practices, behaviors, and attitudes in response to race-related situations in an effort to prove their commonality with Whites in the organization. In contrast to the way gender inequality is perpetuated, racial inequality is maintained when minority workers do racial tasks that construct Whiteness as normative and standard.

Empirically, this theory of racial tasks has yet to be explicitly explored. However, there are ways to envision methodological approaches that could be compatible with this theoretical perspective. Given that the theory of racial tasks makes claims about the ways that organizational practices maintain racial hierarchies, an institutional ethnography would be a particularly useful methodological tactic for examining the ways racial tasks occur at various levels of predominantly White work settings. This methodological approach would generate detailed knowledge of an organization's objectives, goals, and mandates, as well as its institutional culture and norms. More important, it would yield data about the ways that workers at various levels of the organization actually carry out racial tasks, the impact this has on their jobs, and the consequences for workers themselves. Another approach might be to use a mixed-methods approach that assesses survey data that document the racial composition of workers in different strata of the organization along with interviews to identify how various workers at different levels perform racial tasks. This strategy would allow for quantitative data that could empirically document the demographic breakdowns within an organization, along with the ways that racial minority workers at different levels engage in racial labor.

Ultimately, the theory of racial tasks illuminates the ways that organizational hierarchies are often racially segregated, and that the work expected of employees at different levels of the hierarchy includes labor that is subtly racialized and continues to perpetuate inequality. All individuals in the workplace contribute to the racialized nature of the organization through their position in the workplace hierarchy and the ways in which they perform the tasks associated with their position. Tomaskovic-Devey (1993) has argued that in the workplace, employees' job descriptions are imbued with racialized concepts that determine who is hired to perform particular tasks. Our theoretical premise extends this claim to explore how, in addition to job descriptions, cultural and organizational practices at various levels of the organizational structure push workers to engage in labor that upholds racial hierarchies. Workers of color have a myriad of expectations associated with their positions that White workers do not, particularly the expectation that they will perform certain tasks to become more palatable to the White majority. Racial tasks are a key mechanism by which this happens.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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