Strength-Based Organizational Approaches Facilitate Workplace Opportunities for People from Lower Socioeconomic Status Backgrounds

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Abstract

The workplace stands as one of the most powerful drivers of societal (in)equality. For employees from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, it can represent both a ticket toward upward mobility and a consequential source of seemingly intractable stigma. Four studies build on emerging strength-based research to test whether workplaces can challenge this stigma by creating overarching cultures that recognize the beneficial skills employees gain from their otherwise marginalized identities. Study 1 provided foundational insights into these "strength-based organizational approaches" and their implications for key outcomes derived from the State Authenticity as Fit to Environment model. Employees from lower SES backgrounds were especially unlikely to report that their workplaces valued their identities and associated skills which partially explained subsequent disparities in employees' broad sense of comfort and efficacy at work. Studies 2a-2b established these patterns experimentally by demonstrating that exposing participants to a workplace that does communicate a strength-based organizational approach facilitated these productive outcomes while increasing participants' likelihood of disclosing their marginalized identities within a job application task. Study 3 extended these findings to consider how the approaches may also indirectly expand employees' equitable access to opportunity through reducing common biases among their supervisors. Randomly assigning workplace supervisors to briefly engage with a company that highlighted the value of employees' lower SES backgrounds increased supervisors' positive evaluations and likelihood of promoting these employees by 38% relative to an active control condition. Collectively, these pre-registered findings illuminate new opportunities to improve workplace functioning and pinpoint the organizational forces underlying person-context interactions.

Key words: Workplace, Strength-Based Approach, Socioeconomic Status, Stigma, Person-Context Interaction

Public Significance Statement

The workplace is one of the primary gateways to people achieving the American Dream. For people from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds, finding a good job can be a ticket toward providing a more financially stable life for themselves and their families. However, prior research indicates that people from lower SES backgrounds often have to deal with a range of barriers and biases in the workplace as companies commonly view them as less capable than people from higher SES backgrounds. Our research shows that one way to address this pressing issue is to create workplace cultures that instead recognize the valuable skills and resources that people can gain from their lower SES backgrounds. When a workplace adopts such "strength-based organizational approaches", we find that employees from lower SES backgrounds feel more comfortable and effective at their jobs. Furthermore, these approaches lead workplace supervisors to evaluate employees from lower SES backgrounds more positively and subsequently increases their likelihood of promoting these employees by 38%. These insights underscore the potential of strength-based organizational approaches to address barriers to workplace success and the American Dream.

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The workplace is an essential engine of upward economic mobility (see Kelly et al., 2023; Stephens et al., 2017). Indeed, people from lower socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds often make major life decisions—such as whether or not to pursue a college degree or relocate to a new city—to increase their chances of gaining access to careers that can help them achieve social and financial prosperity (Browman, 2017; Geist et al., 2008). Extant data from the United States suggest that this pathway is functioning relatively well for many individuals. Research on "social class transitioners" indicates that up to 33% of people who grew up in households with less income and educational access are able to enter careers that helps them substantively increase their socioeconomic standing (e.g., Cataldi et al., 2018; Chetty et al., 2026; see Phillips et al., 2020). By other metrics, however, the workplace is falling well short of its promise to facilitate the American Dream. People from lower SES backgrounds currently have less access to economic opportunity than in any decade since World War II (e.g., Chetty et al., 2017; Cheung et al., 2021). In fact, even when employees from lower SES backgrounds "make all of the right moves" and earn a college degree, they still earn about half as much money as similarly credentialed employees who were simply born into higher SES families (i.e., the equivalent of 52 cents on the dollar; Bartik & Hershbein, 2018).

One key source of these disparities is the institutional barriers that employees from lower SES backgrounds contend with across each stage of their professional trajectories (see Choe & Côté, 2024). At the point of career entry, résumé audit studies reveal that these individuals often struggle to gain access to lucrative professional pathways because supervisors in white-collar workplaces systematically favor job applicants when they are presented as coming from a higher

versus lower SES background (e.g., Belmi et al., 2024; Lippens et al., 2023). After overcoming this barrier to gain access to the workplace, employees from lower SES backgrounds often continue to encounter structural and interpersonal biases within their organizations. These range from their organizations prioritizing norms and values that are more common among people from higher SES backgrounds (Stephens et al., 2019) to their coworkers underestimating their abilities and excluding them from social events (e.g., Martin & Harrison, 2022; Terry & Fobia, 2019). Consequently, employees often attempt to conceal their lower SES backgrounds at work (e.g., Kallschmidt & Eaton, 2019). Although this can help shield them from potentially stigmatizing interactions, it can also exacerbate disparities in employee well-being, comfort, and workplace satisfaction (Newheiser et al., 2017; see also Gabriel et al., 2025; Holman et al., 2022; Le Forestier & Page-Gould, 2025; for consideration of how lower SES backgrounds are overlooked in workplaces and relevant research broadly, see Kish-Gephart et al., 2023). These barriers limit the opportunities that employees from lower SES backgrounds have to advance through the workplace hierarchy and, subsequently, achieve upward mobility (see Destin & Silverman, 2025; Manzoni & Streib, 2019).

Addressing Barriers Through Strength-Based Organizational Approaches

The present research responds to such challenges by investigating the processes underlying them, as well as how workplaces can more effectively facilitate employees' professional success across different stages of their careers. We specifically focus on the potential of leading workplaces to adopt alternative "strength-based organizational approaches" by creating overarching institutional cultures, including policies and practices, that recognize the important skills, knowledge, and resources that employees gain as a direct factor of their otherwise stigmatized lower SES backgrounds. While empirical research on the effects of

strength-based approaches is still in its early phases, recent work has begun to outline the unique advantages they may offer over the more typical ways that workplaces and societies at large engage with people's marginalized identities (see discussion of the "identity-specific strengths approach" in Silverman, Rosario et al., 2023). For instance, organizations commonly convey multicultural and related ideologies that underscore the value of working with individuals across a wide range of backgrounds because of the different perspectives and skillsets that they may offer (see Plaut et al., 2018). Some studies have found that these ideologies can be beneficial when they are carefully communicated within workplace settings (Gündemir et al., 2019, see also discussion of the "difference-as-strength approach" in Silverman, Rosario et al., 2023). However, other data suggest that marginalized individuals perceive them as inauthentic or even extractive because they do not overtly address the pervasive stigmas and related power imbalances that marginalized employees face (e.g., Bertone et al., 2003; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Stark et al., 2021; see also Leong, 2021; Torrez et al., 2024). Strength-based approaches stand in contrast to multicultural ideologies because they directly reject such stigmas. They do so through highlighting employees' marginalized backgrounds as a source of assets in and of themselves, regardless of whether or not they differ from those of privileged employees. In other words, these approaches represent an affirmative method of elevating people's marginalized identities by explicitly connecting them to beneficial strengths in their own right rather than in comparison to the identities and abilities of more privileged individuals (Silverman, Rosario et al., 2023; Stephens et al., 2019)

Importantly, strength-based approaches are agnostic to the specific strengths that employees might gain from their lower SES or otherwise marginalized backgrounds. Research on social class transitioners and related organizational dynamics has begun to uncover the

beneficial skills that employees often gain from their lower SES backgrounds (e.g., navigational capital, collaborative strengths; Belmi et al., 2024; Dittmann et al., 2020; Martin & Côté, 2019). However, strength-based approaches do not narrow in on these particular abilities—and thus potentially limit the ways in which employees may express their strengths—but rather represent a broader non-prescriptive framework that workplaces can use to afford employees opportunities to experience their lower SES backgrounds as an asset to their success (c.f., Silverman et al., 2026).

Despite their promise, research on the effects of these approaches is limited in two primary ways. First, a large majority of the work has been conducted in educational settings whose incentive structures and social dynamics differ dramatically from those commonly found in the workplace (see Stephens et al., 2017; though see Belmi et al., 2024 for preliminary evidence for the benefits of encouraging people to reflect on the strengths that employees might gain from their otherwise marginalized backgrounds). Second, has focused on the effects of applying strength-based ideas at the individual level rather than to broader organizations practices. In schools, this has taken the form of having students and educators reflect on the skills and knowledge that students might have gained from their lower SES backgrounds (Bauer et al., 2025; Hernandez et al., 2023; Silverman, Hernandez et al., 2023; Silverman et al., 2026). Although such efforts have been shown to consistently benefit these students' well-being, motivation, and persistence, it is unclear whether similar effects may be achieved through more institutional processes as organizations create broader cultures that underscore the value of people's lower SES backgrounds.

On the one hand, prior research suggests that some types of organizational-level efforts have limited effects on employee outcomes. For example, studies on the efficacy of mandated

bias awareness trainings and related programs to improve the workplace environment for marginalized people have yielded largely null or even negative results (e.g., Chang et al., 2019; Dover et al., 2020; Forscher et al., 2019; Quillian et al., 2017). On the other hand, however, cultural and organizational psychology suggest that organizational-level efforts have potential to activate long-term shifts in the psychological and behavioral affordances available to marginalized people in context (Brady et al., 2018; Hall et al., 2018; Kalev et al., 2006; Markus & Hamedani, 2019). According to this perspective, such influence is especially powerful because it can be transmitted through both direct and indirect channels (Brady et al., 2024; Hamedani et al., 2024). The direct pathway occurs as organizational policies and practices concretely guide the day-to-day tasks and resources available to marginalized individuals. The indirect pathway develops as overarching organizational structures shape the norms and values of important social intermediaries (e.g., workplace supervisors) in ways that can have downstream consequences for marginalized people's opportunities. As such, understanding how workplaces can effectively incorporate strength-based organizational approaches represents an important step toward addressing the ranging barriers that employees from lower SES backgrounds face throughout their careers.

Present Research

The current studies thus bridge prior strength-based research with the State Authenticity as Fit to Environment (SAFE) model (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018) to make specific predictions regarding the consequences of workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches. The SAFE model recognizes that the stigmas that are frequently attached to people's lower SES and otherwise marginalized backgrounds limit people's success through undermining their sense of fluency between who they are and their current context (see Durante & Fiske, 2017; Fiske et al.,

2018). This manifests in marginalized people having fewer opportunities to experience a *sense of fit* in context (i.e., the broad ability to navigate contexts in ways that feel comfortable and authentic; Aday et al., 2025) and to *engage* with that environment in ways that yield productive outcomes (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018; see also Oyserman & Destin, 2010). As noted above, however, strength-based organizational approaches offer an avenue for directly countering these detrimental stigmas. As such, we predict that organizations that recognize the value of employees' lower SES backgrounds will expand these individuals' affordances to effectively fit in and engage with their workplace context.

We test this hypothesis across four primary studies involving varied measurement tools and levels of analysis. The studies were inspired by an archival study (see Pilot Study 1 in the Supplemental Materials) that revealed that fewer than 2% of large U.S.-based companies applied strength-based organizational approaches and that the diversity ideologies that companies did commonly express were uncorrelated with their marginalized employees' workplace experiences. Thus, we sought to provide encompassing insights into how strength-based organizational approaches could be effectively communicated across layers of the workplace contexts and in ways that benefit employees throughout different stages in their professional trajectories (c.f., the attraction-selection-attrition model, De Cooman et al., 2009; Schneider, 1987).

Study 1 tested the current predictions within an initial correlational study. We specifically tested whether there are indeed SES-based disparities in employees' perceptions of whether their workplaces recognize their backgrounds as an asset, as well as the potential implications that such disparities have for key indicators of employee fit and engagement. Studies 2a-2b established these findings experimentally through manipulating prospective employees' perceptions of a workplace's strength-based organizational approaches within a job application

paradigm. Finally, Study 4 tested how these approaches may continue to benefit employees' outcomes well into their careers through expanding their opportunities to advance in the workplace. Building on the cultural psychology and organizational behavior literatures cited above, we examined whether workplaces that adopt strength-based organizational approaches may indirectly support the equitable success of employees from lower SES backgrounds through shifting supervisors' attitudes toward these employees' abilities and subsequent supporting their career advancement.

Transparency and Openness

The complete manipulations and measures for each study may be found in the Supplemental Material. Code and data for each study are also available at https://osf.io/ht9gq/?view_only=156dfecadc11446198d31642254873bf. Analyses were conducted in Rv4.5.1. Power analyses were conducted using the 'pwr' (Champely et al., 2017) and 'InteractionPoweR' packages (Baranger et al., 2023).

Study 1

Study 1 was a pre-registered (https://osf.io/ar2eq/overview?view_only=1eb01d98197343cb84baad93160970b0) test of the relationships between employees' SES backgrounds, perceptions of their workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches, and a range of indicators of their fit and engagement in the workplace that were generated through an initial pilot study (see Pilot Study 2 in Supplemental Materials).

Method

Participants

A total of 404 U.S.-based participants were recruited from Prolific Academic to participate in Study 1[1]. Participants were eligible for the study if they 1) were currently a full-time employee, 2) had earned a four-year college degree (a proxy indicator of whether they were in a white-collar workplace in which we expected disparities to be most likely to emerge), and 3) held a position in a workplace with at least 50 employees. This final selection criterion was included to minimize the possibility that employees' reported perceptions of their workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches were merely based on their experiences with one or two colleagues rather than the broader organization. We also sought to provide socioeconomically representative insights into the phenomena of interest by evenly recruiting participants based on the highest level of education achieved by their parents or guardians. Across studies, participants self-reported their demographics following the terminology included in the respective tables (See Table 1 for complete demographic information for Study 1).

[1] A priori power analyses conducted with the pilot study indicated that 344 participants were necessary to achieve 80% power to detect an estimated exploratory interaction effect of r = -.14. Additional participants were recruited to account for data missingness and potential exclusions per the pre-registration.

Table 1

Sample Demographics from Study 1

Generation Status	
First-Generation (neither parent/caregiver received a 4-year college degree)	48.5%
Continuing-Generation (at least one parent/caregiver received a 4-year college degree)	51.5%
Annual Household Income of Family of Origin	
< $25,000	5.0%
$25,001 - $40,000	16.1%
$40,001 - $70,000	22.3%
$70,001 - $90,000	16.6%
$90,001 - $120,000	16.6%
$120,001 - $150,000	10.9%
$150,001 - $200,000	5.7%
$200,001 - $300,000	5.2%
> $300,000	1.7%
Gender	
Woman	39.9%
Man	59.2%
Non-Binary	1.0%
Race	
White	65.8%
East Asian	6.4%
Southeast Asian	2.7%
Black/African-American	11.6%
Pacific Islander	0.2%
Indian Subcontinent	0.7%
Hispanic-American, Latinx, Chicanx	4.7%
Native American, American Indian, Indigenous	0.5%
Multi-Racial	9.9%
Asian & White	3.8%
Black & White	1.0%
Black & White & Latinx	0.2%
Black & White & Indigenous	0.2%
Pacific Islander & White	0.2%
Middle Eastern & White	0.5%
East Asian & Southeast Asian	0.2%
East Asian & White	0.2%
Southeast Asian & White	0.2%
White & Latinx	3.2%
White & Indigenous	0.2%

Measures

Upon providing their informed consent, participants were asked to complete each of the measures below. Self-report measures were presented on a scale of 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 7 (*Strongly agree*) unless otherwise noted.

Socioeconomic Status. Participants' SES background was measured using a standardized composite of the annual household income that their families had while they were growing up (1 = *<$25,000* to 9 = *> $300,000*) and the highest level of education achieved by their parents/caregivers (1 = *Did not finish high school* to 5 = *Graduate degree (MA, Ph.D., J.D., M.D)*). The standardized composite measure has the advantage of connecting the economic, educational, and social factors that contribute to one's socioeconomic standing, thereby providing a more encompassing measure of SES background than individual measures of income and educational status (e.g., Kraus et al., 2009). Given that such standardized measures obscure people's objective socioeconomic circumstances (Stephens et al., 2024), however, it is also important to note that participants who were considered as coming from a lower SES background within the current sample (i.e., one standard deviation below the mean of the composite measure) were from households earning lower annual incomes (median = $25,001 to $40,000) and were more likely to be first-generation college students (100%) compared to participants who were considered as coming from a higher SES background (i.e., one standard deviation above the mean of the composite measure; median annual household income = $200,001 to $300,000, 2.2% first-generation college students). Nonetheless, we present interaction analyses for each study broken down by a binary indicator of first-generation college student status—another indicator of SES commonly used in the organizational literature (e.g., Dittmann et al., 2020)—in the Supplemental Materials to demonstrate that the present findings are robust to other operationalizations of SES.

Perception of Workplace's Strength-Based Organizational Approaches. To provide initial insights into employees' experiences with workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches, participants completed a 7-item measure of the extent to which they felt as though their workplace valued their background on a scale of 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly* agree; $\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 4.06$, $SD = 1.14$; adapted from Silverman, Hernandez et al., 2023). In the interest of encouraging participants' consistent interpretations of these items, the scale was prefaced with "The term 'background' is often used to refer to people's identities and past experiences" and participants were then encouraged to think about their socioeconomic background. Example item: "The place where I work thinks that my background will help me be successful."

Workplace Fit. As a face valid measure of the SAFE model's concept of fit, participants responded to a 4-item measure of people's feelings of comfort in their workplace ($\alpha = 0.95$, $M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.291$; adapted from Walton & Cohen, 2007). Example item: "I feel like I fit in with my current workplace."

Identity Disclosure. Following the research described above outlining the prevalence and negative effects of identity concealment, we measured participants' willingness to share information about their identities with their colleagues as an initial behavioral indicator of fit. This outcome was captured using a 3-item scale ($\alpha = 0.85$, $M = 4.99$, $SD = 1.69$; adapted from Le Forestier & Page-Gould, 2025). Example reverse-scored item: "If you could prevent other people from knowing your background in your workplace, how frequently would you try to hide your background?" measured on a scale 1 (*Never*) to 7 (*Always*).

Workplace Engagement. Participants completed a comprehensive 10-item measure that captured their broad sense of commitment, enthusiasm, and growth at their jobs[2] ($\alpha = 0.91$, $M = 5.32$, $SD = 1.22$; adapted from Brayfield & Rothe, 1951; Mowday et al., 1982; Porath et al., 2012). Example items: "This organization really inspires the very best in me in the way of job performance", "Most days I am enthusiastic about my work", "At work, I find myself continually improving."

Likelihood of Receiving Promotion. Finally, to provide initial insights into the potential consequences and behavioral manifestations of employees' workplace engagement, we asked participants how likely they thought they were to receive a promotion at their job on a scale of 1 (*Extremely unlikely*) to 6 (*Extremely likely*; $M = 3.36$, $SD = 1.71$). While this item requires prospection on the part of the participants, it has the advantage of tapping into participants' sense that their engagement in the workplace would be rewarded in the near future. Single item: "How likely are you to receive a promotion at your workplace within the next two years".

Analyses

[2] Note that the original analyses tested associations between perceptions of workplace's strength-based organizational approaches and workplace satisfaction, commitment, and thriving separately based on findings within the pilot study and evidence in the established organizational literature (rs=.42 to .46, ps <.001). Following reviewer feedback, however, we conducted split-half exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses with the complete set of items administered in Study 1 (see Supplemental Materials). Analyses indicated that the three "constructs" could be parsimoniously explained by the single factor now included in the main text.

The pre-registered analyses center on two primary hypotheses: 1) that participants from lower SES backgrounds would be less likely to perceive that their workplace adopted a strength-based organizational approach to engaging with their backgrounds compared to participants from higher SES backgrounds, and 2) that these lower perceptions would be linked to lower fit and engagement in the workplace. To minimize Type I error rates, we adjusted the p-values for each of the correlations relevant to the primary hypotheses using Holm's Sequential Bonferroni Procedure (Holm, 1979). Though not described in the pre-registration, we also conducted follow-up linear regressions that tested whether the correlational results were robust to the inclusion of relevant individual- and context-level covariates in the interest of establishing the validity of the current strength-based organizational approach construct. The covariates included a binary indicator of participants' racial marginalization status (i.e., 0 = White, 1 = Non-White), a binary indicator of gender marginalization status (i.e., 0 = Man, 1 = Woman or Non-Binary), their estimates of the proportion of people at their workplace who shared their SES or racial background, and their experiences of stereotype threat in the workplace.

Finally, we conducted an exploratory structural equation model to examine whether any relationships between participants' SES backgrounds and the outcomes were explained by their perceptions of whether their workplaces valued their backgrounds. This analysis accounted for the same covariates used in the linear regressions and was conducted using the 'lavaan' package (Rosseel, 2012). The complete results for each analysis may be found in the Supplemental Materials.

Results

We found the predicted relationship between participants' SES backgrounds and their perceptions of workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches. Participants from lower

SES backgrounds were less likely to think that their workplace valued their identities and past experiences relative to participants from higher SES backgrounds (r = .27, 95% CI [.18, .36], adjusted p < .001). The association was robust to the inclusion of the covariates described above (β = 0.17, 95% CI [0.08, 0.26], p < .001), including race and gender which were not associated with participants' perceptions (βs = .004 to -.08; ps = .102 to .952).

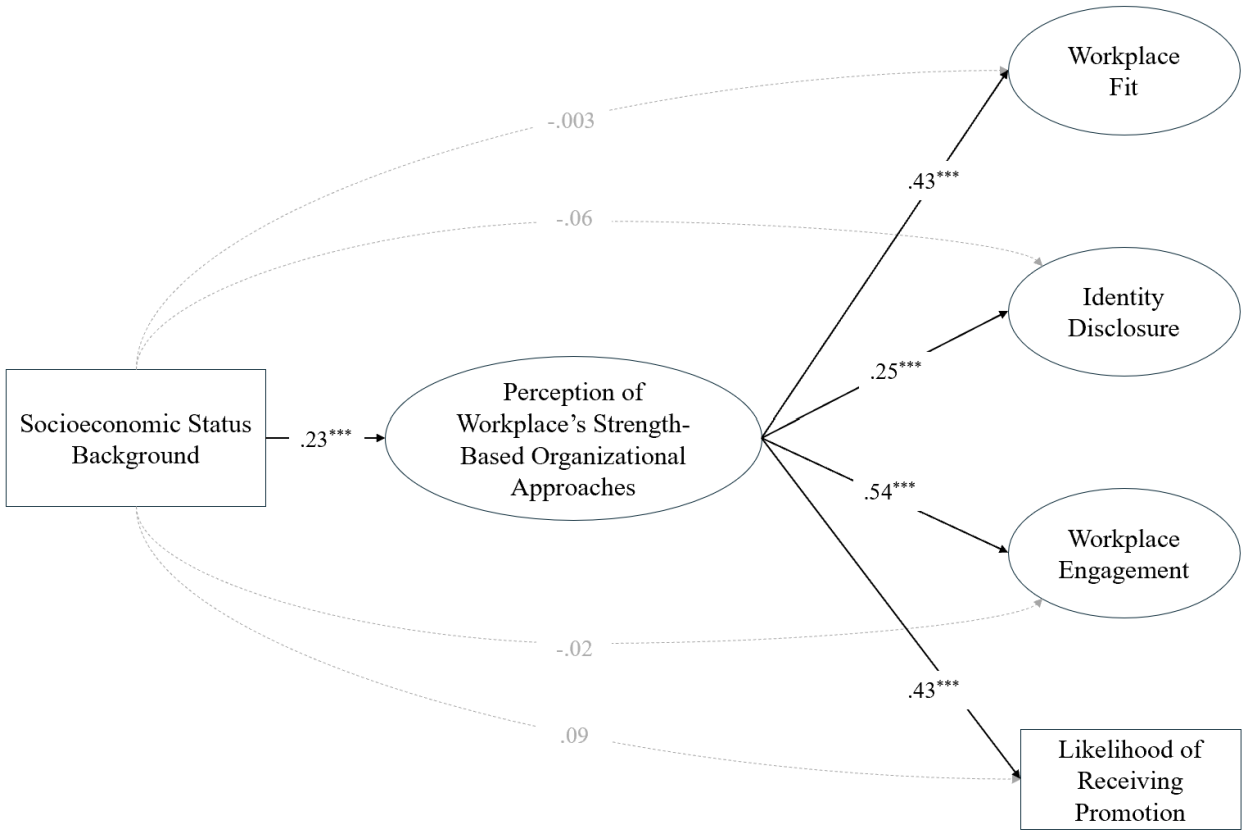
Participants perceptions of their workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches were in turn associated with participants feeling more comfortable in their organization (r = .53, 95% CI [.46, .60], adjusted p < .001), being more willing to disclose their identities at work (r = .37, 95% CI [.28, .45], adjusted p < .001), having a greater sense of enthusiasm and commitment in their jobs (r = .49, 95% CI [.31, .56], adjusted p < .001), and believing that they were more likely to receive a promotion in the near future (r = .26, 95% CI [.17, .35], adjusted p < .001). Once again, each of these results replicated in linear regressions accounting for individual- and context-level covariates: workplace fit (β = 0.40, 95% CI [0.32, 0.48], p < .001), identity disclosure (β = 0.22, 95% CI [0.12, 0.29], p < .001), engagement (β = 0.45, 95% CI [0.36, 0.54], p < .001), and promotion expectations (β = 0.29, 95% CI [0.18, 0.39], p < .001). Such findings not only support the discriminant and predictive validity of strength-based organizational approaches but also indicate that this construct may serve as a potential leverage point for facilitating more positive workplace outcomes.

The structural equation model provided further support for this possibility. Though it is important to note at the onset that Study 1 is cross-sectional and thus the current data cannot be used to make strong claims about psychological process, this analysis provided valuable evidence extending prior strength-based research and the predictions made by the SAFE model. The relationships between SES and each of the indicators of fit and engagement were mediated

through participants' perceptions of their workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches: workplace fit (indirect effect = .10, 95% CI [.04, .16], p = .001), identity disclosure (indirect effect = .06, 95% CI [.02, .10], p = .004), workplace engagement (indirect effect = .13, 95% CI [.05, .20], p = .001), and promotion expectations (indirect effect = .10, 95% CI [.03, .17], p = .003). In other words, SES-based disparities in participants' workplace outcomes were largely attributable to whether or not they believed that their workplace saw their backgrounds as an asset to their success (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Study 1 Results from Structural Equation Model



Note. Standardized coefficients are presented. Latent variables are denoted with ovals while manifest variables are denoted with rectangles. Fit indices: Comparative Fit Index = 0.90, Tucker-Lewis Index = 0.88, Standardized Root Mean Square Residual = 0.06, Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = 0.08.*** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Study 1 provided initial correlational evidence that employees are aware of and potentially responsive to how their workplaces view their backgrounds. We extend from studies on related diversity ideologies that do not explicitly name people's marginalized backgrounds as a source of valuable skills to demonstrate that perceptions of workplaces' strength-based

organizational approaches are closely linked to a range of key outcomes. These included proximal constructs that have been examined in related diversity-focused work (e.g., workplace comfort) as well as more distal ones (e.g., identity disclosure, promotion expectations) that help distinguish strength-based organizational approaches and their potential consequences. Given that we were unable to include the full suite of covariates that may explain the current correlational results, however, additional causal research is necessary to establish the potential consequences of strength-based organizational approaches. Studies 2a and 2b thus evaluate the current patterns experimentally while examining how the approaches may be effectively communicated to employees during the early stages of their professional trajectories.

Study 2a

Study 2a was a pre-registered (https://osf.io/z4j5s/overview?view_only=7bff2a5be4594354b1e4923b18e5075c) experiment examining how a workplace that communicates a strength-based organizational approach within its job application materials affects prospective employees' fit and engagement based on a range of self-report and behavioral indicators.

Method

Participants

A total of 439 undergraduate participants were recruited for Study 2a from the subject pool of a research university in the midwestern U.S.[3] Of course, research has documented

[3] A priori power analyses indicated that 312 participants would be necessary to achieve 80% power to detect an estimated standardized beta of .20. Post-hoc sensitivity power analyses indicated that a small interaction

important limitations with making inferences based on these samples (see Sears, 1986). However, university students are ideal for the purposes of the current research in many ways given that they are at a point in their professional journeys when they are learning how to effectively pursue their career goals and are especially attuned to cues regarding future career (see Metz et al., 2009). Complete demographic information for Study 2a may be found in Table 2.

effect (r = .13) was necessary to achieve 80% to detect the hypothesized condition by SES interactions given the current sample.

Table 2

Sample Demographics from Study 2a

Generation Status	
First-Generation (neither parent/caregiver received a 4-year college degree)	16.2%
Continuing-Generation (at least one parent/caregiver received a 4-year college degree)	81.8%
Annual Familial Household Income	
< $25,000	7.1%
$25,001 - $40,000	9.1%
$40,001 - $70,000	12.3%
$70,001 - $90,000	6.6%
$90,001 - $120,000	9.3%
$120,001 - $150,000	7.5%
$150,001 - $200,000	8.0%
$200,001 - $300,000	10.0%
> $300,000	27.6%
Gender	
Woman	55.6%
Man	41.2%
Non-Binary	3.1%
Genderfluid	0.5%
Race	
White	31.9%
East Asian	15.9%
Southeast Asian	0.9%
Latinx	10.0%
Black/African/African-American	10.4%
Indian Subcontinent	7.5%
Middle Eastern	2.1%
Multi-Racial	20.1%
Black, Indian Subcontinent, and White	0.2%
Black and East Asian	0.5%
Black, East Asian, and White	0.2%
Black, Southeast Asian, and White	0.2%
Black and White	2.3%
Black, White, and Native American/American Indian	0.5%
Black, Latinx	0.9%
Black, Latinx, and Native American/American Indian	0.5%
Black and Native American/American Indian	0.2%
Pacific Islander, White, and Native American/American Indian	0.2%
Pacific Island and White	0.2%
Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asian	0.5%
Indian Subcontinent and White	0.7%
Middle Eastern and White	0.9%
Middle Eastern and Latinx	0.2%
East Asian and White	3.4%
East Asian and Latinx	0.7%
Southeast Asian and White	0.5%

Southeast Asian, White, and Latinx	0.2%
White and Latinx	6.8%
White and Native American/American Indian	0.5%

Note. Rates of missingness ranged from 0% to 2.5%.

Materials

Upon consenting to participate in this online study, participants were told that they would be completing a job application. To encourage participants to occupy the mindset of a person applying for a job, they were then asked to reflect on and briefly write about the kinds of careers they wanted to pursue in the future. After completing the reflection, participants were told that they would be asked to respond to a job application from a large workplace that hires people for a range of occupations, potentially including the kinds of careers that participants had just described.

They were then randomly assigned to one of three conditions designed to manipulate participants' perceptions of the organizational approaches that the workplace took to engaging with its marginalized employees. In this way, Study 2a took a "manipulate the mediator" approach to extending the suggestive results from the cross-sectional structural equation model in Study 1. Participants who were randomly assigned to the *strength-based condition* were presented with an introduction to the job application that was ostensibly written by the workplace itself and emphasized its commitment to creating a culture that elevated the skills, and resources that people often gain from their otherwise marginalized backgrounds (example text: "Workplaces often frame people's underrepresented backgrounds—including those of first-generation college students, people from lower-income families, and people of color—as barriers to their success. However, we [the workplace] know that these backgrounds are often sources of unique and important strengths.") Importantly, we included mention of both participants' SES backgrounds and racial backgrounds in an effort to minimize potential demand effects and help

ensure that the conditional materials aligned with the ways in which companies typically communicate their commitments to marginalized employees (see Pilot Study 1 Supplemental Materials).

The remaining participants were randomly assigned to one of two comparison conditions. The *deficit-based condition* was designed to mirror the strength-based one while subtly signaling a more paternalistic approach to engaging with employees from lower SES backgrounds. Participants randomly assigned to this condition received an introduction to the workplace similar to the strength-based condition but that instead signaled that the company viewed marginalized people as lacking in the skills necessary to succeed in the workplace. This condition explicitly invoked people's marginalized backgrounds—to help minimize the possibility that any effects of the strength-based condition were simply due to the explicit invocation of these backgrounds—while describing how individuals who came from these backgrounds may require more support than privileged employees (example text; "We recognize that many people from certain backgrounds may be less familiar with the skills that workplaces often expect from their employees. Our organization wants to help people—for example, those who are first-generation college students and/or from lower-income families, or who identify as people of color—to gain foundational skills (e.g., leadership, creativity, or time-management skills) that will be beneficial throughout their professional careers.") This text was intended to cue paternalistic and stigmatizing ideas about marginalized employees, though it stands apart from typical company diversity statements in that it may have been viewed as conveying a thoughtful commitment to supporting marginalized employees (see Pilot Study 1 Supplemental Materials). For evidence suggesting that the deficit-based condition had positive effects on employee outcomes, see Supplemental Materials).

The other comparison condition served as a direct *control condition.* Participants were presented with a brief message from the company thanking them for their interest in applying for a job without overtly mentioning background or conveying additional information about the workplace's organizational approaches.

Regardless of conditional assignment, participants were then asked to provide written responses to three job application questions that are commonly used by real-world workplaces in the U.S. The first question asked participants to introduce themselves, the second asked them to detail the strengths they felt they would bring to their careers and workplace broadly, and the third asked them to describe a challenge that they had faced and what they learned from that challenge. Across the three application questions, participants wrote an average of 193.98 words (SD = 122.79).

Measures

Socioeconomic Status. Participants' SES background was captured using the same standardized composite measure as in Study 1. Although the overall sample is higher SES relative to the U.S. at large, participants considered as being from a lower SES background were from families earning a median income of $20,001-$40,000 per year and 91% of them were first-generation college students. Among participants considered as being from a higher SES background, the median household income was >$300,000 and 0% of the participants were first-generation college students.

Manipulation Check. Study 2a included a 5-item manipulation check measuring participants' perceptions of the workplace's strength-based organizational approaches, similar to that of Study 1 (α = 0.82, M = 4.41, SD = 0.71). Example item: "This organization thinks that my background is an asset to my success."

Behavioral Outcomes. Both behavioral measures were derived from qualitative coding of participants' responses to the job application questions. The coding process was carried out by a lead researcher and two undergraduate research assistants. Each researcher coded 70-80% of the responses and any inconsistencies in the codes assigned to participants' responses were resolved through consensus-building conversations within the team.

Marginalized Identity Disclosure. Following Study 1's findings, the primary behavioral indicator of fit was operationalized as the number of times that people mentioned their marginalized identities in their responses to the job application questions (M = 0.34, SD = 0.72, K = .65; range = 0 to 3). The code included any identities that are commonly considered as being marginalized (e.g., Black and Latinx racial identities, being a first-generation college student, being LGBTQ+), though we include analyses centered on participants' lower SES backgrounds specifically below.

Application Quality. Participants' behavioral engagement with the workplace was operationalized through coders' ratings of the quality of their responses to the application questions. Ratings were given on a scale of 0-4 based on evaluation systems used by large hiring agencies. A 0 indicated that the participant did not engage with the prompt; a 1 indicated that they put minimal effort into their responses and would be disqualified from consideration for the job; a 2 indicated that they answered the questions in full but did not provide sufficient detail to be considered for the job; a 3 indicated that they answered the prompts fully and thus may be advanced to the next phase of the application process; and a 4 indicated that the participant engaged with the questions fully and thoughtfully and thus would be advanced to the next phase (M = 2.60, SD = 0.73, K = .63).

Self-Report Outcomes. For this and subsequent studies, self-report measures were presented on a scale of 1 (*Strongly disagree*) to 6 (*Strongly agree*) unless otherwise noted.

Workplace Fit. Participants' self-reported feelings of fit were captured using a 3-item measure of their prospective comfort in the workplace, as in Study 1 ($\alpha = 0.82$, $M = 4.38$, $SD = 0.60$). Example item: "I would feel like I belong at this organization."

Workplace Interest. Given that participants were exposed to the workplace only briefly, and thus likely would not be able to meaningfully respond to the same indicators of engagement used in Study 1, we opted to include a single item measure of this construct based on participants' interest in applying to a job at the workplace in the future. The item was administered on a scale of 1 (*Not at all interested*) to 6 (*Extremely interested; $M = 4.10$, $SD = 0.85$*): "How interested would you be in applying to work at this organization in the future?"

Analyses

Per the pre-registration, each of the outcomes above was regressed on two orthogonal contrasts. The first contrast opposed the strength-based condition (coded as 2) against both the deficit-based and control conditions (coded as -1). The second contrast opposed the deficit-based condition (coded as 1) against the control condition (coded as -1). Each model also included participants' SES background, the interaction between their SES and the orthogonal contrasts, and an additional covariate to account for the fact that participants were sampled from one of two different school terms. The main effects of the first contrast were most relevant to causally establishing the promising results of Study 1 while the interaction effects between this contrast and SES were most relevant to evaluating the hypothesis that workplaces that do communicate strength-based organizational approaches may have stronger effects among prospective employees from lower SES backgrounds. For additional dummy coded analyses indicating that

the current effects are stronger when comparing the strength-based condition to the deficit-based and control conditions separately, see Supplemental Materials.

Results

The complete results for Study 2a may be found in Table 3.

Table 3

Study 2a Results from Interaction Models Predicting the Five Outcomes of Interest

Regression Term	Manipulation Check	Marginalized Identity Disclosure	Application Quality	Workplace Fit	Workplace Interest
Main Effect of Contrast 1 (2 = strength-based, -1 = deficit-based & control)	**0.15** [0.05, 0.24]**	**0.11* [0.03, 0.19]**	**-0.07 [-0.16, 0.03]**	**0.11* [0.02, 0.21]**	**0.04 [-0.06, 0.14]**
Main Effect of Contrast 2 (1 = deficit-based, -1 = control)	0.06 [-0.04, 0.15]	0.05 [-0.03, 0.114]	0.04 [-0.05, 0.14]	0.02 [-0.07, 0.12]	-0.06 [-0.15, 0.04]
Main Effect of SES	0.04 [-0.05, 0.14]	-0.45*** [-0.53, -0.37]	-0.05 [-0.14, 0.05]	0.03 [-0.06, 0.13]	-0.02 [-0.12, 0.07]
Contrast 1 x SES Interaction	**-0.03 [-0.13, 0.06]**	**-0.11* [-0.19, -0.03]**	**-0.02 [-0.12, 0.07]**	**0.003 [-0.09, 0.10]**	**0.02 [-0.07, 0.12]**
Contrast 2 x SES Interaction	0.01 [-0.08, 0.11]	-0.06 [-0.15, 0.02]	-0.02 [-0.12, 0.08]	-0.04 [-0.14, 0.06]	0.01 [-0.08, 0.11]
Main Effect of Sample Covariate	-0.05 [-0.15, 0.04]	0.01 [-0.07, 0.09]	-0.02 [-0.12, 0.08]	-0.08 [-0.17, 0.02]	-0.06 [-0.15, 0.04]
Simple Effect of Strength-Based Condition Among Lower SES Students (-1 SD)	—	0.22*** [0.10, 0.33]	—	—	—
Simple Effect of Strength-Based Among Higher SES Students (+1 SD)	—	0.0004 [-0.12, 0.12]	—	—	—
Simple Effect of SES Among Students in Strength-Based Condition	—	-0.53*** [-0.63, -0.43]	—	—	—
Simple Effect of SES Among Students in Control Condition	—	-0.37*** [-0.48, -0.27]	—	—	—

Note. Effect sizes for each coefficient are presented above 95% confidence intervals in brackets. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Simple slopes analyses were only conducted on variables in which a significant interaction with SES was detected. Coefficients most relevant to the current hypotheses are bolded.

Manipulation Check

The strength-based condition successfully manipulated participants' perceptions that the workplace adopted a strength-based organizational approach to their backgrounds compared to the deficit-based and control conditions (β = 0.15, 95% CI [0.05, 0.24], p = .002). Interestingly, the interaction between this condition and participants' SES was not statistically significant (β = -0.03, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.06], p = .488). Regardless of their SES background, participants were more likely to think that their backgrounds would be valued when they were randomly assigned to the strength-based condition relative to the two comparison conditions. Thus, even though the strength-based condition explicitly invoked people's lower SES backgrounds, it is possible that participants interpreted the workplace's recognition of the value of employees' otherwise marginalized backgrounds as signaling its broad dedication to supporting employees.

Behavioral Outcomes

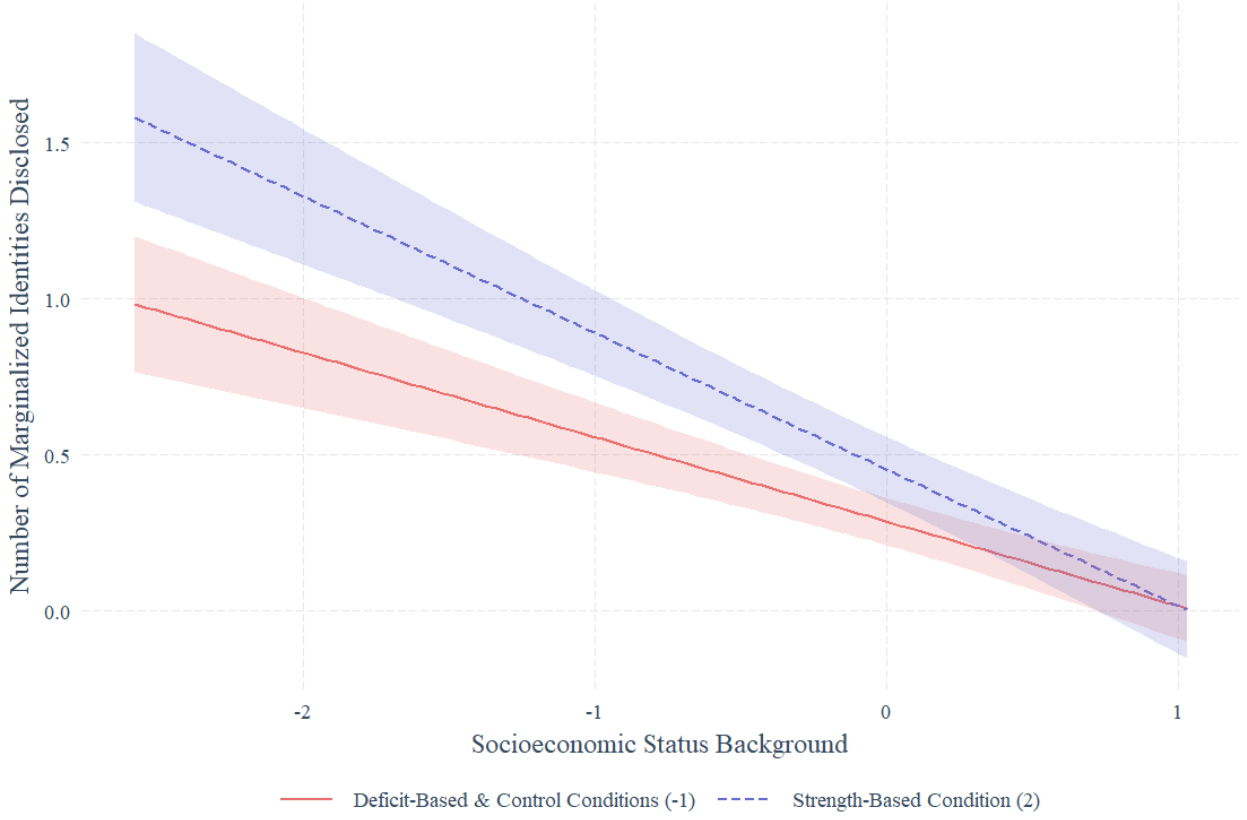
In support of Study 2a's predictions, participants shared about twice as many marginalized identities in their responses to the job application (i.e., the behavioral indicator of fit) when they were randomly assigned to the strength-based condition (M = 0.50, SD = 0.87) compared to the deficit-based condition (M = 0.30, SD = 0.64) and control condition (M = 0.22, SD = 0.60; β = 0.11, 95% CI [0.03, 0.19], p = .011). The significant Contrast 1 by SES interaction (β = -0.11, 95% CI [-0.19, -0.03], p = .010) indicated that this effect was primarily driven by participants from lower SES backgrounds ($M_{Strength\ Based}$ = 1.31, $SD_{Strength\ Based}$ = 1.26; $M_{Deficit\ Based}$ = 1.09, $SD_{Deficit\ Based}$ = 0.92; $M_{Control}$ = 0.86, $SD_{Control}$ = 1.11; β = 0.22, 95% CI [0.10, 0.33], p < .001)[4]. It is important to recognize that the effect size of the interaction fell slightly

[4] Although the primary analyses examined effects on participants' disclosure of marginalized identities broadly given that strength-based organizational approaches may foster employees' comfort with disclosing

below that which a post-hoc interaction power analysis suggested that Study 1 was powered to detect, though follow-up dummy coded analyses replicate this finding while achieving sufficient statistical power (see Supplemental Materials). Regardless, this finding provides initial causal evidence for the relationship between strength-based organizational approaches and identity disclosure found in Study 1 while underscoring the potential of these approaches to welcome a wider array of identities into the workplace (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Study 2a Effect of Condition on Marginalized Identity Disclosure by SES



a wide range of otherwise stigmatized backgrounds, this interaction does replicate in models predicting a binary indicator of whether participants specifically mentioned coming from a lower SES background β = -0.08, 95% CI [-0.16, -0.003], p = .041.

Note. Fitted regression lines are plotted with 95% confidence intervals. Socioeconomic Status Background is standardized and presented in Standard Deviation units.

The main effect of the strength-based condition (β = -0.07, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.03], p = .175) and interaction with participants' SES (β = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.12, 0.07], p = .660) on the quality of participants' application responses were not statistically significant. Although it is possible that strength-based organizational approaches do not encourage employees' workplace engagement, these null effects may also be attributable to the fact that participants were completing an application to a hypothetical rather than an actual job. As a result, they may have lacked the information or incentive necessary to effectively respond to the current task.

Self-Report Outcomes

In line with the findings on identity disclosure, the strength-based condition also promoted participants' beliefs that they would feel welcomed and included by others in the workplace relative to the deficit-based and control conditions (β = 0.11, 95% CI [0.02, 0.21], p = .020). The interaction was not significant (β = 0.003, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.10], p = .952). This may be expected following the results of Study 1 and given that there was no condition-by-SES interaction on participants' perceptions that the workplace adopted an organizational approach that valued their backgrounds (i.e., the manipulation check). We did not find the main effect (β = 0.04, 95% CI [-0.06, 0.14], p = .422) or interaction (β = 0.02, 95% CI [-0.07, 0.12], p = .645) on participants' interest in the workplace, further indicating that the current materials may have been sufficient to support participants' sense that they could fit in at the hypothetical workplace but not sufficient to prompt their ongoing engagement with it.

Discussion

Study 2a makes two primary contributions to the current work. Most immediately, it demonstrated that people's perceptions of whether their workplaces view their identities as an asset are malleable and responsive to the organizational approaches companies take to engaging with marginalized people. The study also provides causal evidence that these approaches benefit people's sense of fit within that context across multiple indicators, particularly among employees from lower SES backgrounds. Though further work is necessary, this finding reinforces the potential of broad organizational forces to reduce common group-based stigmas that undermine individual and interpersonal outcomes in the workplace. We did not find significant effects on the quality of participants' responses to the job application task or their interest in working at the organization in the future. As noted earlier, there are several possible reasons why these effects and a subset of the interactions did not reach statistical significance. Namely, it is likely that the study materials did not sufficiently and clearly communicate their intended messages. Study 2b thus went on to examine whether revising the current materials to more effectively encourage participants' reflection on the workplace's organizational approaches can bolster the predicted effects.

Study 2b

Study 2b was a conceptual replication of Study 2a. The hypotheses, measures, and analytic approach remained the same though the conditional materials and modality of the job application were adjusted to support participants' investment in the task.

Method

Participants

Study 2b included 382 participants recruited from the subject pool at a research university in the midwestern U.S.[5] The demographics in the study are similar to those of Study 2a (see Table 4).

[5] A priori power analyses based on Study 3 indicated that 387 participants were necessary to achieve 80% power to detect an estimated standardized beta of .18. Post-hoc sensitivity power analyses indicated that a small interaction effect (r = .14) was necessary to achieve 80% to detect the hypothesized condition by SES interactions in the current sample. The interaction effects in Study 2b fall below this threshold, though dummy coded analyses replicate the current findings with sufficient statistical power as in Study 2a (see Supplemental Materials).

Table 4

Sample Demographics from Study 2b

Generation Status	
First-Generation (neither parent/caregiver received a 4-year college degree)	19.6%
Continuing-Generation (at least one parent/caregiver received a 4-year college degree)	73.3%
Annual Familial Household Income	
< $25,000	9.9%
$25,001 - $40,000	11.0%
$40,001 - $70,000	10.5%
$70,001 - $90,000	7.1%
$90,001 - $120,000	9.4%
$120,001 - $150,000	3.4%
$150,001 - $200,000	8.1%
$200,001 - $300,000	11.8%
> $300,000	20.9%
Gender	
Woman	55.8%
Man	35.9%
Non-Binary	1.6%
Race	
White	22.8%
East Asian	18.3%
Southeast Asian	2.9%
Latinx/Chicanx	11.3%
Black/African/African-American	12.1%
Indian Subcontinent	6.8%
Middle Eastern	1.6%
Multi-Racial	18.7%
Black, Pacific Islander, and White	0.3%
Black and Indian Subcontinent	0.3%
Black and Middle Eastern	0.3%
Black and Southeast Asian	0.3%
Black, Southeast Asian, and Native American/American Indian	0.3%
Black and White	2.4%
Black, White, and Latinx/Chicanx	0.3%
Black, White, Latinx/Chicanx, and Native American/American Indian	0.3%
Black, Latinx	0.3%
Pacific Islander and East Asian	0.5%
Indian Subcontinent and Southeast Asian	0.3%
Indian Subcontinent and White	0.8%
Indian Subcontinent and Latinx/Chicanx	0.3%
Middle Eastern, Southeast Asian and White	0.3%
Middle Eastern and White	1.3%
East Asian and Southeast Asian	0.3%
East Asian and White	2.9%
East Asian and Latinx/Chicanx	0.3%
Southeast Asian and White	1.6%

White and Latinx	4.7%
White and Native American/American Indian	0.3%
Mixed	0.3%

Note. Rates of missingness ranged from 0% to 7.1%.

Materials

Two changes were made to the experimental materials between Studies 2a and 2b. First, the strength-based and deficit-based conditions were revised to clarify their intended messages. The opening sentences of the strength- and deficit-based conditions more effectively centered the idea that people's lower SES backgrounds can be a source of strengths or barriers, respectively. Additional adjustments were made to subsequent sentences to more forcefully convey strength- or deficit-based ideas. For example, text in the strength-based condition was revised to "…we reject the widely held assumption that people's underrepresented backgrounds are a barrier to their success. We know that people's diverse backgrounds are instead often an asset that are crucial to their success and teach them valuable strengths."

The second change involved the modality through which participants responded to the three questions in the job application. Rather than write their responses to these questions as in Study 2a, participants in Study 2b recorded their responses using the audio recording program Phonic (https://www.phonic.ai/). In addition to easing the experience of completing the job application, and thus potentially encouraging additional engagement with the application questions, this adjustment had the advantage of paralleling the growing real-world practice of having applicants respond to questions in audiovisual formats. Participants were able to prepare their answers prior to recording them and were given up to 1-minute to share their responses. These data were automatically transcribed before being verified and coded by the research team for the same behavioral outcomes in Study 2a.

Measures

Socioeconomic Status. Study 2b used the same standardized composite measure of participants' families' annual household incomes and the highest level of education attained by their parents/caregivers. Overall, participants were from relatively higher SES backgrounds. However, participants considered as being from a lower SES background came from families earning a median income of $20,001-$40,000 per year and 100% of them were first-generation college students. Among participants considered as being from a higher SES background, the median household income was >$300,000 and 0% were first-generation college students.

Manipulation Check. Participants were asked to respond to the same 5-item measure of their perceptions that the workplace adopted a strength-based organizational approach toward their identities as in Study 2a ($\alpha = 0.83$, $M = 4.47$, $SD = 0.81$).

Behavioral Outcomes.

Marginalized Identity Disclosure. Participants' responses to the job application were coded for the number of times participants mentioned their marginalized identities as in Study 2a ($M = 0.45$, $SD = 0.77$, $K = .62$; range = 0 to 3).

Application Quality. The quality of participants' responses to the job application was coded on a scale of 0-4 as in Study 2a ($M = 2.95$, $SD = 0.80$, $K = .66$).

Self-Report Outcomes.

Workplace Comfort. Participants were asked to respond to an expanded 4-item version of the measure of their feelings of fit in the workplace featured in Study 2a ($\alpha = 0.81$, $M = 4.37$, $SD = 0.76$).

Workplace Interest. Participants were asked to respond to the same single-item measure of their interest in applying to work at the workplace in the future as in Study 2a ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.95$).

Results

The complete results for Study 2b may be found in Table 5.

Table 5

Study 2b Results from Interaction Models Predicting the Five Outcomes of Interest

		Behavioral Outcomes		Self-Report Outcomes	
Regression Term	Manipulation Check	Marginalized Identity Disclosure	Application Quality	Workplace Fit	Workplace Interest
Contrast 1 (2 = strength-based, -1 = deficit-based & control)	**0.28*** [0.18, 0.38]**	**0.17*** [0.08, 0.26]**	**0.01 [-0.09, 0.12]**	**0.14** [0.04, 0.25]**	**0.14** [0.04, 0.25]**
Contrast 2 (1 = deficit-based, -1 = control)	0.09 [-0.01, 0.19]	0.15** [0.05, 0.24]	0.01 [-0.10, 0.12]	0.07 [-0.03, 0.18]	0.07 [-0.03, 0.18]
Main Effect of SES	-0.06 [-0.16, 0.04]	-0.43*** [-0.52, -0.34]	-0.07 [-0.18, 0.04]	-0.15** [-0.25, -0.04]	-0.07 [-0.17, 0.04]
Contrast 1 x SES Interaction	**-0.06 [-0.16, 0.04]**	**-0.09* [-0.18, -0.01]**	**-0.02 [-0.13, 0.09]**	**-0.04 [-0.14, 0.06]**	**0.10* [-0.20, -0.00]**
Contrast 2 x SES Interaction	-0.02 [-0.12, 0.09]	-0.20*** [-0.29, -0.10]	-0.12* [-0.23, -0.00]	-0.12* [-0.23, -0.02]	-0.07 [-0.17, 0.04]
Main Effect of Sample Covariate	-0.06 [-0.16, 0.04]	-0.10* [-0.19, -0.01]	-0.03 [-0.14, 0.08]	-0.07 [-0.17, 0.03]	-0.08 [-0.18, 0.02]
Simple Effect of Strength-Based Condition Among Lower SES Students (-1 SD)	—	0.25*** [0.13, 0.37]	—	—	0.24*** [0.10, 0.39]
Simple Effect of Strength-Based Among Higher SES Students (+1 SD)	—	0.07 [-0.06, 0.20]	—	—	0.04 [-0.11, 0.19]
Simple Effect of SES Among Students in Strength-Based Condition	—	-0.49*** [-0.59, -0.38]	—	—	-0.14* [-0.26, -0.02]
Simple Effect of SES Among Students in Control Condition	—	-0.36*** [-0.47, -0.24]	—	—	0.0004 [-0.13, 0.13]

Note. Effect sizes for each coefficient are presented above 95% confidence intervals in brackets. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. Simple slopes analyses were only conducted on variables in which a significant interaction with SES was detected. Coefficients most relevant to the current hypotheses are bolded.

Manipulation Check

As in Study 2a, the strength-based condition successfully promoted participants' perceptions that their background would be valued in the workplace relative to the deficit-based and control conditions ($\beta = 0.28$, 95% CI [0.18, 0.38], $p < .001$). The interaction with participants' SES was not statistically significant ($\beta = -0.06$, 95% CI [-0.16, 0.04], $p = .267$). Given that a similar result was found in the previous study, it is possible that positive cues indicating a workplace's support for people's marginalized backgrounds may signal that it has a broadly welcoming organizational approach, regardless of whether someone comes from a lower SES background. This is particularly interesting to consider in the face of current discourse regarding whether centering people's marginalized identities in the workplace will come at the expense of employees from privileged groups (Iyer, 2022; Lacen, 2025)

Behavioral Outcomes

The effects on the behavioral indicator of fit replicated Study 2a. Participants were more likely to share their marginalized identities in response to the job application questions when they were randomly assigned to the strength-based condition ($M = 0.68$, $SD = 0.96$) compared to the deficit-based ($M = 0.47$, $SD = 0.76$) and control conditions ($M = 0.19$, $SD = 0.42$; $\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.08, 0.26], $p = .004$; see Figure 3a). The interaction was also statistically significant ($\beta = -0.09$, 95% CI [-0.18, -0.01], $p = .038$) indicating that participants from lower SES backgrounds were especially likely to disclose their marginalized identities in the application when they were randomly assigned to the strength-based condition ($M_{Strength\ Based} = 1.40$, $SD_{Strength}$

$_{Based}$ = 1.12; $M_{Deficit\ Based}$ = 1.39, $SD_{Deficit\ Based}$ = 0.09; $M_{Control}$ = 0.38, $SD_{Control}$ = 0.62; β = 0.25, 95% CI [0.13, 0.37], $p < .001$)[6].

Once again, there was no main effect (β = 0.01, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.12], p = .794) or interaction (β = -0.02, 95% CI [-0.13, 0.09], p = .711) on the quality of participants' responses to the job application. Having participants record their responses to the job application questions did increase the proportion of participants who received the highest possible rating for the quality of their responses from 8% in Study 2a to 22% in Study 2b. However, this increase was distributed similarly across conditions potentially indicating that the language in the strength-based condition was not sufficient to motivate participants to engage more deeply with an application for a hypothetical job.

Self-Report Outcomes

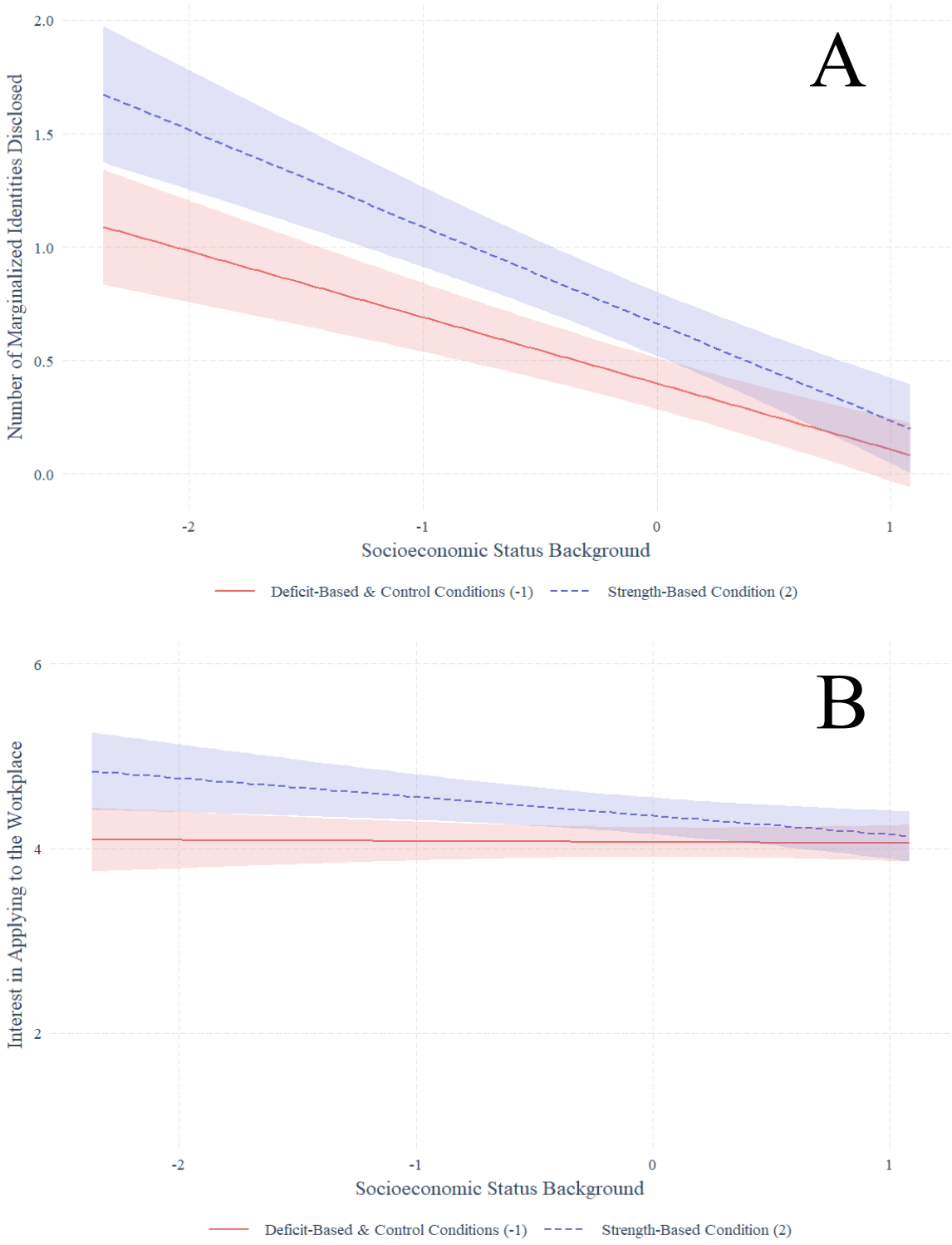
Nonetheless, participants also felt more welcomed and included when the workplace took a strength-based organizational approach (β = 0.14, 95% CI [0.04, 0.25], p = .006). As in the previous studies, this benefit was seen across participants from higher and lower SES backgrounds, as indicated by the non-significant interaction effect (β = -0.04, 95% CI [-0.14, 0.06], p = .384; though see the dummy coded analyses in the Supplemental Materials for evidence that the interaction approaches statistical significance when comparing the strength-based condition to the control condition).

[6] These results replicate in models predicting a binary indicator of whether participants mentioned their lower SES backgrounds specifically rather than the number of broader marginalized identities that they mentioned: Contrast 1 by SES interaction β = -0.11, 95% CI [-0.02, -0.19], p = .015.

Furthermore, extending from Study 2a, the strength-based condition did increase participants' interest in applying for a job at the workplace in the future relative to both the deficit-based and control conditions (β = 0.14, 95% CI [0.04, 0.25], p = .007). This effect was qualified by the predicted interaction (β = -0.10, 95% CI [-0.20, -0.001], p = .049). Though the interaction is underpowered and thus should be interpreted with some caution, it indicates that participants from lower SES backgrounds were especially interested in continuing to engage with the workplace when it communicated strength-based organizational approaches (β = 0.24, 95% CI [0.10, 0.39], p < .001; see Figure 3b). In other words, the benefits of these approaches extend beyond employees' identity disclosure and broad feelings of comfort in the workplace to also encourage prospective employees' pursuit of their professional goals.

Figure 3

Study 2b Condition by SES Interactions on Workplace Fit and Engagement



Note. Fitted regression lines are plotted with 95% confidence intervals. Socioeconomic Status Background is standardized and presented in Standard Deviation units.

Discussion

Study 2b replicated and extended the primary findings from Study 2a. The results demonstrate that workplaces can create valuable affordances for prospective employees from lower SES backgrounds to feel a sense of fit and desire to engage with the workplace through recognizing the value of people's otherwise marginalized backgrounds. In concert with Study 2a, these findings provide further support for the SAFE model while beginning to outline how strength-based ideas may be communicated at a broader organizational level that has not been featured in prior strength-based research.

Toward this end, there are a number of opportunities to sharpen the insights provided by these two studies. Future work should examine whether the current results are replicable within non-university samples of working adults. While it is promising that the main effects identified in Studies 2a and 2b generally align with the correlations found in Study 1's sample of full-time employed adults, additional studies with alternative samples and manipulations are warranted. On the one hand, university students may be particularly responsive to strength-based organizational approaches leading to an overestimation of the current effects. On the other, the results of Study 1 and the archival pilot study shared in the Supplemental Materials suggest that these approaches may stand out more and thus be more beneficial among working adults with greater exposure to the ways that workplaces typically invoke employees' marginalized backgrounds. Additional studies may also look to compare strength-based organizational approaches to the related multicultural and diversity ideologies directly to further establish the theoretical overlap and disjoint between different approaches (see Pilot Study 1 in the Supplemental Materials).

Last but not least, it is important to note that the consistent positive effect of the strength-based condition on participants' likelihood of disclosing their marginalized identities to a potential employer within their responses to the job application will not in itself drive positive workplace outcomes. As noted above, disclosing one's marginalized identities can come at a cost to employees' professional advancement due to common interpersonal and intergroup biases (e.g., Belmi et al., 2024). While it is promising that strength-based organizational approaches can welcome a wider array of identities into the workplace, concurrent efforts are necessary to mitigate these biases to facilitate employees' effective professional advancement. As such, we build from the cultural and organizational perspectives described above (e.g., Hamedani et al., 2024) to consider how strength-based organizational approaches may benefit employees from lower SES backgrounds through not only directly facilitating their positive beliefs and behaviors in the workplace, but also through more indirect pathways. Specifically, we focus on the consequences that the approaches have for workplace supervisors as important gatekeepers to employees' professional opportunities during later stages in their professional trajectories.

Study 3

Study 3 was a 2 (company approach; strength-based vs. active control) by 2 (candidate SES; lower SES vs non-lower SES) experiment testing the effects of workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches on supervisors' evaluations of employees from different socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as their subsequent personnel decisions.

Method

Participants

In total, 348 U.S.-based participants were recruited from Prolific Academic to participate in Study 3[7]. To help address sample limitations in Studies 2a and 2b, the current study exclusively features participants who were pre-screened to ensure that they were currently or had previously served in managerial positions in the workplace. In this way, the current study is positioned to provide valuable insights into how people with in-depth knowledge regarding the process of navigating personnel decisions respond to strength-based organizational approaches. Pre-registered analyses conducted with pilot study data (https://osf.io/jrdvx/overview?view_only=3cc3e3499f7e4360b4361b4f4e02c609) indicated that, as predicted, the effects of the experimental conditions were strongest among participants from higher SES backgrounds. Coupled with the fact that white-collar managerial positions in the U.S. are overwhelmingly comprised of individuals from these backgrounds (Ingram & Oh, 2022), participants were only eligible for Study 3 if at least one of their parents/caregivers had received a four-year college degree. Complete demographic information may be found in Table 6.

[7] A priori power analyses conducted with a pilot study indicated that 320 participants were necessary to achieve 80% power to detect an estimated interaction effect of $r = .16$. Post-hoc power analyses indicated that the observed mean interaction of $r = .14$ achieved 73.8% power within the current sample. Thus, the current results may be interpreted with some caution.

Table 6

Sample Demographics from Study 3

Annual Current Household Income	
< $25,000	3.2%
$25,001 - $40,000	7.8%
$40,001 - $70,000	15.2%
$70,001 - $90,000	14.7%
$90,001 - $120,000	14.9%
$120,001 - $150,000	18.1%
$150,001 - $200,000	12.9%
$200,001 - $300,000	8.0%
> $300,000	4.3%
Gender	
Woman	51.4%
Man	45.4%
Non-Binary	2.0%
Genderfluid	0.3%
Race	
White	62.4%
East Asian	4.6%
Southeast Asian	2.6%
Latinx	2.3%
Black/African/African-American	17.8%
Indian Subcontinent	1.7%
Middle Eastern	0.9%
Native American/American Indian	0.3%
Multi-Racial	6.6%
Black and White	1.4%
Black and Native American/American Indian	0.3%
Middle Eastern and White	0.6%
East Asian and White	1.7%
East Asian, White, and Latinx	0.3%
Southeast Asian and White	0.3%
Southeast Asian and Latinx	0.3%
White and Latinx	1.4%
White, Latinx, Native American/American Indian	0.3%

Note. Rates of missingness ranged from 0% to 0.8%.

Materials

After providing their informed consent, participants were told that they were invited to be a part of the study because a U.S. company was interested in soliciting their expert feedback on its process for selecting employees for promotion. This cover story was designed to both bring to mind participants' roles as current or past supervisors and increase their investment in subsequent

materials. Next, participants were told that they were going to have a chance to learn more about the broad organizational approach of the company that they would be assisting so that they could provide informed insights into two of their employees who were candidates for an upcoming promotion. Information about the company was presented in the form of two webpages that were developed for the purposes of Study 3 but were based on the data collected in the archival pilot study described in the Supplemental Materials. The first webpage was viewed by all participants and introduced the company as a consulting group that worked in a wide range of industries, including construction, hospitality, and medical care.

Participants were then randomly assigned to view one of two webpages designed to manipulate their perceptions that the workplace adopted a strength-based organizational approach. In the *strength-based condition*, participants were presented with a webpage highlighted the company's dedication to valuing "…the important strengths that employees gain as a direct factor of their backgrounds, including those related to race, gender, and economic circumstances." As in the prior studies, the materials mentioned marginalized backgrounds beyond those related to SES to minimize potential demand effects on participants' attitudes toward the promotion candidates. The company's statement was followed by testimonials from three current employees. Two of the testimonials conveyed employees' appreciation for the fact that the company saw their experiences growing up in lower income families as an asset to their success. The third testimonial simply described the company culture as being based on respect and dedication.

Participants in the *active control condition* were presented with a webpage that conveyed the company's organizational approach as being centered on its "…commitment to supporting our employees to go above and beyond…" Although the condition was designed to convey that

the company cared about its employees and their success, it did so without invoking the strengths that employees may have gained from their marginalized backgrounds. The webpage included three employee testimonials that were closely adapted from those featured in the strength-based condition. To mitigate the possibility that any effects of the strength-based condition were simply due to participants being exposed to successful employees from lower SES backgrounds, the first two testimonials in the active control condition again explicitly referenced the fact that the employees came from lower income families. Rather than highlighting the company's strength-based organizational approach, however, these testimonials emphasized the employees' appreciation for the company's commitment to delivering high-quality services. The final testimonial was identical to the one featured in the strength-based condition.

Finally, participants were shown the company's evaluations of two current employees who were eligible for a promotion. These evaluations consisted of brief summaries of the candidates' educational backgrounds, strengths, and weaknesses. The first evaluation did not provide any information about the candidate's SES. For the second evaluation, participants were randomly assigned to receive embedded information indicating that the employee was from a lower SES background (i.e., the *lower SES condition*, example text: "[Candidate 2]'s greatest strength is his ability to solve problems. He gained this skill from his experiences growing up in a low-income family and learning to find creative solutions to barriers he faced.") or non-lower SES background (i.e., the *non-lower SES condition*, example text: "[Candidate 2]'s greatest strength is his ability to solve problems. He gained this skill from his parents who also work in the consulting industry and taught him how to find creative solutions to different barriers.") The two employee evaluations were counterbalanced to minimize potential noise in the data related to participants preferring one candidate over the other.

Measures

The primary outcomes in Study 3 extend from the prior studies to examine participants' perceptions of the candidates' fit and engagement in the workplace, as well as their likelihood of selecting different candidates for promotion. Participants were asked to respond to the measures of fit and engagement for both the first candidate (i.e., the one for whom no information about SES was presented) and the second candidate (i.e., the one for whom participants were randomly assigned to be presented with information indicating that they were from a lower or non-lower SES background). The dependent variables are based on participants' evaluations of the second candidate.[8]

Perceived Fit of Candidate. Following the prior studies, participants were asked to complete a 2-item measure of the extent to which they believed that the candidate from a lower or non-lower SES background fit in with the company, which was referred to as "ServiceOne" (adapted from Van den Bosch & Taris, 2014; r = .69, M = 4.66, SD = 0.96). Items: "I think that this candidate fits in well with the culture at ServiceOne", "I think that this candidate feels comfortable being themselves at ServiceOne".

Perceived Competence of Candidate. Building from the prior studies, participants completed a 2-item measure of their beliefs about how effective the candidate from a lower or

[8] Although the study also included measures of participants' broader strength-based, deficit-based, and paternalistic beliefs about employees from marginalized backgrounds, these outcomes were not the primary focus of the pre-registration and thus are not presented. Exploratory analyses on these outcomes indicated no main effect of the organizational approach condition or candidate SES condition and no interaction effects between the two conditions on these outcomes (βs $\leq$ .10 , ps $\geq$ .061).

non-lower SES background was in the workplace (developed for the purposes of this work, based on Reio & Sutton, 2006; $r = .77$, $M = 4.70$, $SD = 0.95$). This measure was included both as a proxy indicator of the SAFE model's focus on individuals' abilities to productively engage in context and following prior work indicating that employees from lower SES backgrounds are frequently stereotyped as less competent than their colleagues from higher SES backgrounds (Belmi et al., 2026; Durante & Fiske, 2017). Items: "This candidate is probably a very competent employee", "This candidate makes important contributions to ServiceOne's work".

Promotion Decision. After completing the measures above, participants were again presented with the two candidate evaluations. They were then asked to choose which of the two candidates to recommend for the promotion (item text: "Based on what you know about our company and what we look for in our employees, which of the two candidates do you think is most qualified to be promoted?"). Responses were coded such that a 0 indicated that they chose the first candidate and a 1 indicated that they chose the second candidate whose SES background was randomized for participants. Given that the information presented in the candidate evaluations was counter-balanced, the expected overall mean is 0.50, indicating that 50% of participants chose the second candidate ($M = 0.49$; $SD = 0.50$).

Analyses

We conducted linear and logistic regressions to test the primary hypotheses. These models predicted participants' perceptions of the second candidate's fit and engagement, as well as whether they selected this candidate for promotion, from participants' organizational approach condition (0 = active control condition; 1 = strength-based), candidate SES condition (0 = non-lower SES, 1 = lower SES), and the interaction between these two variables. Study 3's primary prediction was that there would be significant organizational approach by candidate SES

condition interactions on each of these outcomes. Among participants randomly assigned to the lower SES candidate condition, those who were also assigned to the strength-based condition would evaluate the candidate more favorably and be more likely to recommend him for the promotion compared to participants in the active control condition.

Results

The complete results for Study 3 may be found in Table 8. The magnitude and statistical significance of the models do not change after accounting for the counterbalanced presentation of the candidate evaluations.

Table 8

Study 3 Results from Interaction Models Predicting the Three Outcomes of Interest

Regression Term	Perceived Fit of Candidate	Perceived Competence of Candidate	Promotion Choice
Main Effect of Organizational Approach Condition (0 = Active Control, 1 = Strength-Based)	0.17** [0.07, 0.28]	0.09† [-0.01, 0.19]	0.07 [-0.14, 0.28]
Main Effect of Candidate SES Condition (0 = Non-Lower SES, 1 = Lower SES)	0.03 [-0.08, 0.13]	-0.02 [-0.12, 0.09]	0.09 [-0.12, 0.31]
Organizational Approach by Candidate SES Interaction	0.12* [0.01, 0.22]	0.13* [0.02, 0.23]	0.26* [0.04, 0.47]
Simple Effect of Strength-Based Condition Among Participants Assigned to Non-Lower SES Candidate	0.06 [-0.09, 0.20]	-0.04 [-0.18, 0.11]	-0.09 [-0.24, 0.06]
Simple Effect of Strength-Based Condition Among Participants Assigned to Lower SES Candidate	0.29*** [0.14, 0.43]	0.22** [0.07, 0.37]	0.16** [0.01, 0.31]
Simple Effect of Lower SES Candidate Among Participants in Active Control Culture Condition	-0.09 [-0.24, 0.06]	-0.14† [-0.29, 0.003]	-0.08 [-0.23, 0.07]
Simple Effect of Lower SES Candidate Among Participants in Strength-Based Culture Condition	0.14† [-0.01, 0.29]	0.11 [-0.04, 0.26]	0.17* [0.02, 0.32]

Note. Effect sizes for each coefficient are presented above 95% confidence intervals in brackets. † $p < .10$, * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

Perceived Fit and Competence of Candidate

We found consistent support for Study 3's hypotheses. There was a positive main effect of the strength-based condition on the extent to which participants believed that the candidate fit in well at the company ($\beta = 0.17$, 95% CI [0.07, 0.28], $p = .001$). We also found the predicted organizational approach by candidate SES condition interaction on this outcome ($\beta = 0.12$, 95% CI [0.01, 0.22], $p = .031$). Simple slopes analyses indicated that, among participants randomly assigned to receive information indicating that the candidate was from a lower SES background,

those who were also randomly assigned to the strength-based condition were more likely to view the candidate as being a good match for the company relative to those in the active control condition (β = 0.29, 95% CI [0.14, 0.43], p < .001; See Figure 4A). Similar to the prior studies, there was no indication that the strength-based condition decreased participants' perceptions of the fit of the candidate from a non-lower SES background (β = 0.06, 95% CI [-0.09, 0.20], p = .454).

The hypothesized interaction effect also emerged in the model predicting participants' ratings of the competence of the candidate (β = 0.13, 95% CI [-0.01, 0.19], p = .019). Within the active control condition, participants perceived the candidate as less competent, at a level of marginal statistical significance, when they were randomly assigned to receive information indicating that the candidate was from a lower vs. non-lower SES background (β = -0.14, 95% CI [-0.29, 0.003], p = .057). This difference was erased in the strength-based condition, however (β = 0.11, 95% CI [-0.04, 0.26], p = .154), due to the fact that the strength-based condition significantly increased participants' perceptions of the abilities of the candidate from a lower SES background (β = 0.22, 95% CI [0.07, 0.37], p = .004; see Figure 4B). In other words, workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches appear to not only directly reinforce productive outcomes among employees from lower SES backgrounds themselves (i.e., Studies 1-2b) but also foster supervisors' positive perceptions of these employees in ways that can indirectly benefit their workplace success.

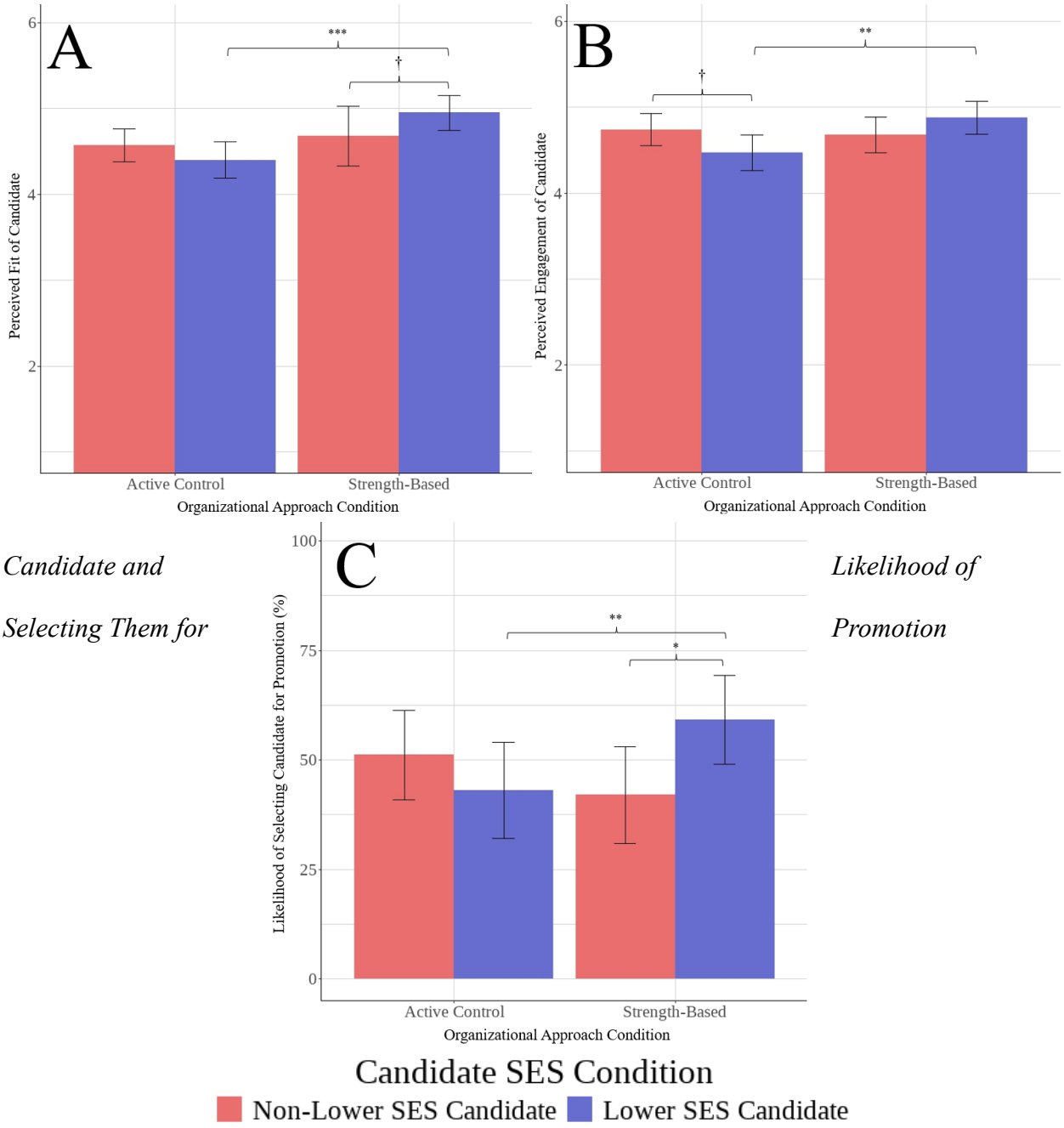
Promotion Decision

The value of this more indirect pathway through which strength-based organizational approaches can benefit employees from lower SES backgrounds was reinforced by the analysis on the promotion decision task. We once again found the predicted interaction effect on

participants' likelihood of selecting the second candidate for promotion (β = 0.26, 95% CI [0.04, 0.47], p = .020). Relative to the control condition, the strength-based condition increased participants' likelihood of recommending that the candidate from a lower SES background receive the upcoming promotion (β = 0.16, 95% CI [0.01, 0.31], p = .035; see Figure 4C). In odds ratio terms, this corresponds to participants being 38% more likely to select the candidate from a lower SES background for the promotion when they were randomly assigned to be exposed to a workplace that explicitly valued employees' marginalized identities and associated strengths compared to one that expressed a general commitment to its employees' success without invoking strength-based perspectives (Interaction OR = 2.77, 95% CI [1.18, 6.54], p = .020). Despite well-documented biases in people's perceptions of the capabilities of employees from lower SES backgrounds, providing an opportunity for supervisors to briefly engage with strength-based organizational approaches shifted their decision-making processes in ways that can support these employees' ongoing professional success. It is also of note that there was no effect, positive or negative, of the strength-based condition among participants who were randomly assigned to receive information indicating that the candidate was from a non-lower SES background (β = -0.09, 95% CI [-0.24, 0.06], p = .229). This pattern is consistent across studies, further demonstrating the potential of strength-based organizational approaches to create important professional opportunities for employees from lower SES backgrounds without undermining outcomes among those who hold more privileged identities.

Figure 4

Study 3 Organizational Approach by Candidate SES Interaction Effects on Perceptions of Candidate and Likelihood of Selecting Them for Promotion



Note. † p < .10, * p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Discussion

Study 3 provides further evidence for the wide-ranging effects of strength-based organizational approaches. Whereas the prior studies documented the ways that these approaches may benefit employees from lower SES backgrounds directly, the current results highlight their potential to also shift how employees are viewed by important social intermediaries in ways that drive equitable access to opportunity. This insight extends beyond previous individual-level applications of strength-based approaches to highlight the range of benefits that shifting broader organizational cultures can have for people across their professional trajectories.

Importantly, Study 3 advanced these ideas based on data collected with individuals who had served as workplace supervisors. In other words, even among people with significant prior experience in the kinds of situations presented in Study 3, we found that brief and subtle cues indicating that a workplace rejected common group-based stigmas can lead supervisors to view and treat employees from lower SES backgrounds more favorably. Although additional research is necessary to examine how these findings may be adapted for specific organizational settings, the collective results underscore the wide-ranging potential of strength-based organizational approaches to foster more productive psychological and behavioral outcomes throughout the workplace.

General Discussion

Psychology has seen a rapid rise in interest in the effects and applications of strength-based approaches in recent years (see DeJoseph et al., 2024; Silverman, Rosario et al., 2023). Accumulating evidence demonstrates their potential to challenge narrow and stigmatizing representations of marginalized people, particularly those from lower SES backgrounds, and subsequently reinforce a wide range of productive outcomes. Research regarding how the

approaches affect people's psychological and behavioral outcomes is still in its early stages, however. To date, a majority of the empirical work in this domain has focused on the experiences of marginalized students in school (see Bauer & Walton, 2024). Though educational contexts undoubtedly contribute to societal (in)equity, stigmatizing ideas about marginalized groups do not stop at the classroom door. The workplace—given its outsized influence over economic, social, and health-related inequalities (Stephens et al., 2014; Stephens et al., 2017; Stephens et al., 2019)—stands as an especially important context to continue to build understandings of strength-based approaches and their implications for individual and societal outcomes (cf., Belmi et al., 2024; Johnson & Pietri, 2024).

The current research helps meet this goal through investigating how these approaches manifest in the workplace as well as the processes through which they shape people's access to professional opportunity. Study 1 first demonstrated that employees from lower SES backgrounds are particularly unlikely to experience workplace contexts that recognize their identities and associated lived experiences as a source of valuable strengths. However, when employees did perceive their workplaces to adopt strength-based organizational approaches, they in turn felt more comfortable and engaged in the workplace across outcomes derived from the SAFE model. Studies 2a-2b established these patterns experimentally while highlighting the potential of the approaches to facilitate self-report and behavioral indicators of these outcomes among prospective employees. Finally, Study 3 extended these insights to consider how strength-based organizational approaches may be deployed during later stages of employees' careers as well as in ways that reshape the attitudes and decisions of powerful gatekeepers to opportunity. Specifically, we demonstrate that when a workplace signals its overarching commitment to elevating employees' marginalized backgrounds, supervisors adopt more positive beliefs about

the abilities of employees from lower SES backgrounds and subsequently are more likely to make decisions that support their long-term career success.

From a practical perspective, the current results may be applied to help reinvigorate companies' efforts to welcome and support employees from backgrounds that have been historically derogated in the workplace. In the face of mounting evidence demonstrating the null effects of previous efforts to reduce institutional and interpersonal bias in the workplace (Dover et al., 2020; see also Arslan et al., 2025), we provide novel data supporting the potential of strength-based organizational approaches to expand the opportunities that employees from lower SES backgrounds have to pursue their professional goals. Importantly, we again note that the approaches are intended to provide an overarching framework that workplaces can use to more effectively engage with employees' otherwise stigmatized backgrounds rather than narrow in on a specific set of "one-size-fits-all" practices. As such, workplaces can apply the current findings to inform a breadth of initiatives based on their specific needs and goals. For example, if an organization finds that prospective employees from lower SES backgrounds receive systematically lower ratings on their job application materials than people from higher SES backgrounds, the workplace may look to revise their applications to create opportunities for the former group to identify positive connections between their backgrounds and professional success. Organizations may similarly develop new training programs that create structured opportunities for supervisors and other workplace leaders to deeply reflect on the value of employees' otherwise stigmatized identities (c.f., Silverman et al., 2026). Future studies should evaluate the effects of such initiatives with an eye toward understanding the spaces in which strength-based organizational approaches may have the greatest impact (e.g., in employees'

interactions with coworkers vs. direct supervisors) while avoiding potentially tokenizing or glorifying representations of marginalization (see Debrosse, 2022; Emerson & Murphy, 2014).

Our findings also have important theoretical implications for emerging research on strength-based approaches more broadly. While prior work has focused on how the approaches may be applied at an individual level (e.g., Hernandez et al., 2021; Silverman, Hernandez et al., 2023), the current findings highlight the potential of communicating the value of individuals' otherwise marginalized backgrounds through higher order organizational cultures. As suggested by relevant models of institutional influence, we find that doing so has the potential to expand the effects of strength-based approaches beyond marginalized individuals themselves (Studies 1-2b) to also shift the attitudes and behaviors of powerful social intermediaries (Study 3) in ways that further guide people's access to professional opportunity (see Hamedani et al., 2024). Though additional research is warranted—particularly longitudinal studies that examine how these direct and indirect pathways operate simultaneously to drive employees' outcomes over time—the current findings highlight the potential of shifting entire organizational cultures rather than solely targeting the individuals within them (see Brady et al., 2024).

In this way, the current studies also help uncover the identity-based processes through which overarching institutional forces influence individuals' beliefs and behaviors. While the notion that organizational cultures play a key role in shaping people's outcomes is taken for granted within the workplace literature, empirically documenting this influence and its underlying mechanisms has proven difficult given the myriad ways that employees and workplaces interact (e.g., De Cooman et al., 2009; Hall et al., 2018). We draw on the SAFE model (Schmader & Sedikides, 2018) to provide preliminary evidence for the value of studying

this influence as being transmitted through people's dynamic understandings of the relationship between their identities and institutions.

The current studies specifically demonstrate how such understandings take shape in response to workplaces' strength-based organizational approaches. However, the wide range of effects identified in the current studies underscores the benefits of examining how additional organizational cues function through people's affordances to experience their identities as an asset to or aligned with their institutions (c.f., Oyserman, 2015). This can include testing whether cues that have already been well-studied in the literature, such as workplace diversity statements or demographic composition (e.g., Birnbaum, 2022; Georgeac & Rattan, 2023; Hall et al., 2018; Holman et al., 2022), operate through people's interpretations of their identities in context. More unwieldy organizational cues, such as a workplace's values and norms, may similarly be operationalized in relation to their consequences for this central identity-based process (c.f., Schneider, 1987). Such work represents an important opportunity to further specify how and when seemingly distal organizational factors affect people's day-to-day experiences.

Constraints on Generality

Of course, working toward each of these promising future directions will also require examining whether and how the effects extend across additional contexts and individuals. The current studies focus on white-collar workplaces given both their potential to propel upward social and economic mobility, and studies demonstrating that they are especially common sites of identity-based stigma (e.g., Belmi et al., 2024; Lippens et al., 2023). It remains to be seen, however, whether similar effects may be achieved in blue-collar workplaces which have been largely left out of the diversity, equity, and inclusion discourse despite the high proportion of marginalized people they employ (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Comparing the effects

of strength-based organizational approaches across these contexts will help establish critical individual- and organizational-level moderators of the current effects. Toward this end, it is also important to highlight the importance of expanding beyond people's lower SES identities and including non-U.S. samples. Deficit-based representations of marginalized people are pervasive and thus strength-based organizational approaches may be effectively leveraged beyond the specialized applications featured in the present work (see Bai et al., 2024). Once again, testing whether the current findings extend across additional populations, as well as the adjustments that workplaces have to make to meaningfully communicate these approaches among additional populations, is critical to establishing the boundary conditions of our effects.

Conclusion

The present research lays the foundation for each of these future directions while further sharpening psychological theory on the complex processes underlying person-context interactions. Such work is critical to not only informing institutional practices that effectively support individual and organizational success, but also to fulfilling the workplace's potential role as an equitable gateway to the American Dream.

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