

Teaching Social Class

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Abstract

Discussing socioeconomic status in college classes can be challenging. Both teachers and students feel uncomfortable, yet social class matters more than ever. This is especially true, given increased income inequality in the United States and indications that higher education does not reduce this inequality as much as many people hope. Resources from current psychological science can inform teaching by providing insights about social class stereotypes, attributions about blame and deserving, trust, cross-class interactions, and class cultures. Implications for teaching include paying attention to the potential for class-based stereotype threat, cultural mismatch, and stigma, as well as considering relative status in addition to absolute rank. Ongoing research can provide useful and hopeful directions for coping with social inequality in college classrooms.

Keywords

social class, socioeconomic status, stereotypes, blame, deservingness, trust, class culture

To encourage class participation, teachers often ask students about their personal experiences with friends or campus groups. If teachers instead ask students about their experiences with social class, this active engagement will instead wither and die. Suddenly, talkative students fall silent. Students shift nervously in their seats, avoiding eye contact. Even simply hearing other people discuss their socioeconomic experiences can be extremely awkward for everyone else. Thus, social class is a topic that teachers need to broach only with the utmost care and sensitivity.

Discussing social class is uncomfortable, even taboo in many circles. While administrators may try to augment socioeconomic diversity, students often try to pretend that campuses are classless. A look at college organizations will turn up special interest groups for students of various ethnicities, religions, genders, and special interests—but it is quite unusual to find a group explicitly for students from a particular socioeconomic background. (One notable exception is the Working Class Student Union at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; <http://www.wcsu-rso.org/aboutus/aboutus.html>.) Highlighting socioeconomic differences on college campuses—even on a campus that prides itself on its “diversity”—can make students uncomfortable.

Social class has a profound influence on our daily lives, and yet even behavioral scientists are often reluctant to talk about it. At the same time that many colleges and universities are making a concerted effort to recruit students from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, social class topics are rarely reflected in psychology courses or in student groups. Even in social psychology, a field that extensively studies diversity, the vast majority of the traditional research has focused on race and gender. By adding social class differences to our concept of diversity, we can better understand variations in psychological

processes and better appreciate the effects that social class can have on interpersonal dynamics, both within and outside the classroom.

This article highlights some relevant findings that teachers can incorporate into their lessons and describes some ways that considering social class can also improve students' classroom experiences. We will first discuss some pressing issues relating to social class in the United States today, highlighting its importance as a field of study. Then we will cover some of the more commonly discussed findings established in prior research. From there, we will address some recent work, with a particular focus on less explored areas in the literature, moving finally to show how these psychological processes can hinder academic achievement and, in some cases, how teachers can mitigate these negative effects.

Social Class in the United States Today

Particularly following the economic recession of 2008 and the highly visible “Occupy Wall Street” social protest movement (Chafkin, 2012), inequality and social class have begun garnering renewed interest in both popular culture and academic research. Social class in the United States is becoming increasingly important to study, as income inequality has been rapidly rising over the past several decades (Kopczuk, Saez, & Song,

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2010) and as upward social mobility has become increasingly difficult (Andrews & Leigh, 2009). Of particular interest to teachers, even higher education—"the great equalizer"—is becoming increasingly stratified by socioeconomic status (SES), with those who are the most advantaged having the most access to and achieving the most success in higher education (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006).

As these data show, social class is not a transient state that reflects only temporary position or resources. In our current society, significant aspects of social class can be hard to change and can have important consequences for behavior and cognition. With that said, different aspects of social class may matter for different types of psychological processes. Because "class" is a complex and multifaceted construct, researchers have operationalized it in a number of different ways, most commonly with some subset of occupational status, household income, educational attainment, and parental education (Hout, 2008). More subjective, rank-based perceptions of social class—or measures of how well off an individual feels in comparison to others—also have significant implications for health and psychological outcomes (e.g., Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013).

Incorporating social class into our teaching and academic discourse is particularly important, given that our society is becoming increasingly segregated by socioeconomic factors. Neighborhoods are becoming increasingly stratified by SES, with people of similar socioeconomic backgrounds tending to live near each other (Reardon & Bischoff, 2011). As mentioned, this type of stratification is also evident in educational attainment (Carnevale & Rose, 2003; Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). Additionally, individuals are increasingly marrying others of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The effects of these patterns on broader inequality are a topic of much contention (Schwartz, 2013), but the effects of these trends on cross-class contact are undeniable. If people live near, go to school with (or don't attend school with), and eventually marry others from backgrounds similar to their own, their understanding of people from different backgrounds will be based less on personal experience and more on culturally transmitted assumptions and stereotypes.

Past Research on Class Differences

Stereotypes of Low-Income People

A great deal of the established social class research has looked at perceptions of the poor. Common stereotypes of the poor are not favorable and tend to perpetuate victim-blaming tendencies (e.g., Lott, 2012). As a group, the poor are often stereotyped as lacking in both warmth (trustworthiness) and competence (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002), eliciting negative reactions such as neglect and disgust (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2008). These stereotypes include character traits such as laziness, stupidity, and dishonesty, which presume that the poor are at least partially to blame for their disadvantage (Chafel, 1997; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Lott, 2002, 2012). Dominant

stereotypes also dehumanize the poor, portraying them as uncivilized and animalistic (Loughnan, Haslam, Sutton, & Spencer, 2014). Such characterizations are also evident in popular media, which tends either to reinforce these negative stereotypes or simply to omit depicting the poor (Bullock, Fraser Wyche, & Williams, 2001; Loughnan et al., 2014).

These negative group-level judgments apply on a more individual level as well, with poor individuals perceived more negatively than those who are more advantaged. In one example from their famous "Hannah" experiment, Darley and Gross (1983) found that observers had lower expectations and more negative evaluations of a child portrayed as poor than those who saw the same child portrayed as middle class. Baron, Albright, and Malloy (1995) replicated this general pattern in a different sample more than 10 years later, finding that participants given little objective information about the child's test scores relied on social class information for performance judgments. Similarly, college students expect other college students to be more competent if they are higher class (Russell & Fiske, 2008). The effect holds for adult targets as well, with Lott and Saxon (2002) finding that participants rated a woman described as "middle class" as more suitable for a school leadership position than a woman described as "working class," even with all other qualifications held constant. More generally, people who are more advantaged tend to distance themselves from the poor, psychologically, interpersonally, and even physically; those who are more advantaged are reluctant to form close friendships with, live near, or even rent to people who are poor (Lott, 2002).

Attributions of Blame and Deserving

Similar disparagement often occurs when people attempt to explain the causes of socioeconomic differences. Especially among those strongly motivated to believe the world is fair, observers often attribute socioeconomic positions to internal attributes such as effort, ability, or morality; these explanations hold people responsible for their socioeconomic positions (e.g., Furnham, 2003; Jost & Hunyady, 2003; Lerner & Miller, 1978; Oorschot, 2000). These attributions can also influence beliefs about what these people deserve or what others think they should receive. For example, if a person is seen as responsible for his low social status, other people will view the person more negatively and will be less likely to endorse giving him aid (e.g., Weiner, Osborne, & Rudolph, 2011). This consideration of deservingness is critical for many policy discussions, particularly those related to poverty and social welfare programs (e.g., Applebaum, 2001; Oorschot, 2000; Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Following from the "just-world" research, people who are seen as responsible for their disadvantage are typically seen as deserving their outcomes, whether positive or negative (Furnham, 2003). This belief reinforces the idea that people who are less advantaged deserve what they currently have and nothing more.

People can be susceptible to thinking this way even about themselves. Those who are less advantaged tend to accept

implicitly these societal stereotypes, seeing themselves as less entitled than others (Major, 1994; McCoy & Major, 2007; Piff, 2014). Individuals of higher SES generally report greater psychological entitlement and tend to behave more narcissistically (Piff, 2014). There are a number of explanations for these patterns of entitlement, but in general, selective social comparisons (where we tend to compare ourselves to others who are similar to us) and attributional biases (where we make causal attributions that favor ourselves) both play a major role in pushing those who are disadvantaged to feel that they are not especially deserving (Major, 1994). This tendency can be especially strong for those who endorse some of the system-justifying ideologies discussed earlier (McCoy & Major, 2007; O'Brien & Major, 2005).

However, moving beyond the individual level, other pressures can influence what observers believe others deserve. Despite many negative perceptions of the socioeconomically disadvantaged, many cultures (such as the United States) also value egalitarian ideals, emphasizing equity and the belief that all citizens deserve a “good” life (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Due to these values, and particularly among those who most strongly support them, researchers sometimes see a contradictory pattern: Those who are least advantaged are also seen as the most deserving. We (along with our colleague Miguel Moya) have conducted a series of studies to investigate this phenomenon. We have found that participants endorse the deservingness of the poor, lower class, and working class (i.e., those least advantaged) relative to the middle class, who in turn are seen as more deserving than the rich or upper class. This pattern is robust across judgments of abstract social class groups, specific exemplars, and even allocations to neighborhood groups, and is most pronounced among liberal participants and those who most value social equality. However, consistent with earlier findings (Major, 1994; McCoy & Major, 2007; Piff, 2014), participants do not apply these judgments to themselves: Although all participants endorsed the deservingness of the less advantaged, those who came from less advantaged backgrounds did not feel especially deserving on an individual level.

Social Class and Trust

Despite these findings focusing on judgments of various social class targets, the literature linking social class and trust has predominantly focused on traits of the perceiver rather than the target. In addition to being important for positive social interactions (Brehm & Rahn, 1997) and for efficient social exchanges (Yamagishi, 2011), trust in others can be important for policies affecting the distribution of resources. After all, even if we perceive a person to be deserving of resources, we might not be willing to part with the goods unless we trust the person to use them well.

Most past research linking trust and class has focused on how a perceiver’s social class influences “generalized” trust, or the belief that most people have benevolent intentions (Yamagishi & Yamagishi, 1994). This type of trust reflects

an individual difference, referring more to the general beliefs of the perceiver than to the characteristics of others. Past research has consistently linked this generalized trust with SES; in the developed world, more advantaged people are more generally trusting of others (Hamamura, 2011). Wealthy people tend to be more trusting than poor people, White people tend to be more trusting than minorities, and college graduates tend to be more trusting than people who are less educated (Delhey, Newton, & Welzel, 2011; Taylor, Funk, & Clark, 2007). Even in a laboratory, where status is temporary and artificially bestowed, participants in a higher status role report higher generalized trust (Lount & Pettit, 2012). Because social class is a form of social status, this pattern makes sense.

Interactions With Others

Beyond its effects on trust, social class influences interpersonal interactions in a number of other ways. Following from the tradition of cultural psychology, which emphasizes the importance of considering cultural variations in psychological phenomena (e.g., Markus & Kitayama, 1991), some research has identified reliable, class-influenced differences in how people behave in social situations. Arising from shared experiences and environments, individuals develop patterns of thinking and behaving that affect how they interact with their environments (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). This framework for understanding behavior can identify some important qualifications on widely accepted theories of behavior—for example, that Americans generally prioritize individuality, valuing those who show independence and uniqueness (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This tendency is frequently contrasted to East Asian cultures, which tend to place more emphasis on social harmony. However, considering variations in social class within the United States, some systematic differences emerge in how “individualism” is conceptualized. In general, researchers have found that higher SES is associated with more so-called soft individualism, focusing on attributes such as uniqueness and self-expression, whereas lower SES is associated with more of a “hard” individualism, emphasizing self-reliance and self-discipline (e.g., Kasserow, 1999; Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

Another class-influenced cultural difference is the value placed on uniqueness versus social conformity. In one series of studies, Stephens, Markus, and Townsend (2007) found that working-class participants generally preferred products that were similar to products chosen by or available to other participants, whereas middle class participants more often preferred a unique option. Even advertisers seem sensitive to this difference. Stephens et al. showed that car advertisements marketed to working-class consumers were more likely to emphasize social connections; in contrast, advertisements for more higher end cars focused on uniqueness.

These general tendencies can be reflected in more social, interpersonal behaviors as well. In one example, lower-class (first-generation college) participants displayed more nonverbal signs of engagement during an interpersonal interaction

than upper-class participants (Kraus & Keltner, 2009). There is also evidence to suggest that along similar lines, lower-class people tend to behave more prosocially than do upper-class people (Piff, Kraus, Cote, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010).

Implications for Teaching

These class-influenced processes matter in an educational context. As society has become more aware of racial and gender gaps in academic achievement, researchers have also begun to illuminate differences by social class as well—and the differences are significant. For example, as mentioned previously, students from the upper quintile of household income are most likely to attend, and then graduate from, 4-year colleges and universities (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). When we look at these sorts of patterns, higher education begins to look less like the great equalizer that we often imagine and more like a means of social reproduction. As teachers who generally value the transformative power of education, we need to pay attention to these differences and think about how we can maximize all students' ability to succeed.

Part of this process of expanding socioeconomic sensitivity has been investigating which aspects of education or social class can influence these outcomes. Some factors contributing to the racial achievement gap also contribute to socioeconomic discrepancies in achievement as well. One example of this is stereotype threat, or the process by which concern over confirming negative stereotypes of one's group distracts and impairs performance. In a series of studies, students from lower SES backgrounds performed worse on academic tests after being primed with their class identity, a pattern that mirrors some of the research on race (Croizet & Claire, 1998). Although the initial study was conducted in France, a similar investigation found American students also susceptible to class-based stereotype threat (Spencer & Castano, 2007). This once again shows that despite the American narrative of the "classless society," social class can profoundly influence experiences and even academic performance.

Nicole Stephens, Hazel Markus, and their colleagues have identified another process that may be responsible for some of these achievement differences, pointing to a "cultural mismatch" between first-generation and continuing-generation college students (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). In this work, they found that first-generation college students (and people from working-class backgrounds more generally) tend to have more interdependent self-construals, prioritizing social connections and group harmony over individual accomplishments. In contrast, more advantaged, continuing-generation college students (and college-educated adults) tend to have more independent self-construals. Importantly, these independent social values emerge in many institutions of higher education: College viewbooks and administrators are likely to emphasize individual values, such as "learning to express yourself," much more than interdependent values, such as "learning to be a team player." This mismatch tends to cause

stress and impairs first-generation students' performance; when provided with (experimentally manipulated) materials that instead emphasize more communal values, these students' performance tends to improve (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012).

Recent work has additionally suggested some other methods of intervening to improve less advantaged students' success in a higher education environment. To counteract the cultural mismatch mentioned earlier, Nicole Stephens and her colleagues tested the effects of a college orientation program designed to "match" students' backgrounds (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014). When student presenters highlighted the possibility of social class differences in student preparation for college and focused on taking advantage of strategies specific to their cultural backgrounds, the new first-generation college students performed better academically than their peers who attended an orientation program that did not emphasize the diversity of students' backgrounds. This intervention did not affect the performance of continuing-generation students, and in fact improved the psychosocial outcomes of students from all backgrounds.

However encouraging these results may be, though, there is still concern about the subjective experience of students in a high-SES environment such as an educational institution. Class-based feelings of stigma and discrimination can be detrimental to students' physical and mental health, even when students perceive the institution itself as supportive (Gilmore & Harris, 2008; Langhout, Drake, & Rosselli, 2009; Langhout, Rosselli, & Feinstein, 2007; Thompson & Subich, 2013). These negative experiences can take the form of outright verbal derogation by teachers or other students, but can also be experienced as more subtle challenges, such as students feeling unable to participate in common social activities due to financial difficulties.

It may be tempting to consider these findings as applicable only to those students who are "truly poor," but research suggests that even those who are financially secure can suffer from class-based biases and anxiety. Although objective class markers such as parental education are certainly important, individuals' feelings of *relative* status, or their position compared to that of other students, appear to play a significant role in their academic success. This finding fits with other research that has emphasized the role of rank (Kraus et al., 2013). Even for students who are objectively well off compared to national averages, higher education environments can be threatening if students feel that, advantaged as they are, everyone else is even *more* advantaged. Students' belief that they are disadvantaged compared to others can lead them to question their "fit," which can lead to cognitive depletion and self-regulation failures (Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011).

Future Directions and Suggestions

The research summarized in this article is only representative of the growing literature exploring the importance of social class in psychological processes; this is far from a

comprehensive survey (for more resources, see Fiske & Markus, 2012). As teachers of psychology, we need to consider the impact of social class both on our lesson plans and in our classrooms. Remembering the importance of subjective status and feelings of fit (e.g., Johnson et al., 2011) and being inclusive in the ways we frame education and achievement (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012) may help students feel more comfortable in academic settings. Additionally, we can offer all students a variety of strategies, encouraging them to use the ones that would be especially helpful, given their own unique backgrounds (Stephens et al., 2014). More generally, when teaching and talking about diversity, we must remember that diversity takes many forms. Although we should certainly continue to teach about the commonly discussed categories of race and gender, we should also include a number of other identities in our understanding of diversity, including SES, sexual orientation, and age. These identities can have a significant impact on our classroom dynamics and on the achievement of our students. By including social class as an area of study both in research and pedagogy, we will be better able to understand psychological processes and be better able to help our students succeed.

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Susan T. Fiske is Eugene Higgins Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs at Princeton University. She investigates social cognition, especially cognitive stereotypes and emotional prejudices, at cultural, interpersonal, and neuroscientific levels. Author of over 300 publications and winner of numerous scientific awards, she has most recently been elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Her recently published book is *The HUMAN Brand: How We Respond to People, Products, and Companies* (with Chris Malone, 2013). Sponsored by a Guggenheim, her 2011 Russell Sage Foundation book is *Envy Up, Scorn Down: How Status Divides Us*. With Shelley Taylor, she has written four editions of a classic text, *Social Cognition* (2013), and on her own three editions of *Social Beings: Core Motives in Social Psychology* (2013). She also edited *Beyond Common Sense: Psychological Science in the Courtroom* (2008), the *Handbook of Social Psychology* (2010), *Social Neuroscience* (2011), the *Sage Handbook of Social Cognition* (2012), and *Facing Social Class: How Societal Rank Influences Interaction* (2012). Currently an editor of *Annual Review of Psychology*, *PNAS*, and *Policy Insights from Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, she is also the President of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences. Her graduate students also arranged for her to win Princeton University's Mentoring Award.

