

Class, Cognition, and Face-to-Face Interaction

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Abstract

Social class—one's relative socioeconomic rank in society—plays a vital role in shaping individuals' future educational and occupational attainment, job satisfaction, and overall mental and physical well-being. Although sociologists have studied macrolevel aspects of class formation and reproduction for over a century, how class distinctions are produced and reproduced on the ground in everyday social interactions has received far less empirical attention. Like other forms of stratification, class inequalities are driven not only by differential access to material resources but also how we fundamentally perceive ourselves, others, and appropriate behavior. Yet, the social sciences have yet to develop a clear and convincing theory of the microdynamics of social class. In this essay, I integrate contemporary research across disciplines to illuminate how social perception and interaction shape and are shaped by social class. I review classical and cutting-edge research on the microdimensions of social class, discuss outstanding issues, and highlight promising directions for future research.

Social class—one's relative socioeconomic rank in society—plays a vital role in shaping social reality. Parental economic and educational backgrounds exert profound effects on individuals' future educational and occupational attainment, job satisfaction, and overall mental and physical well-being (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Despite national narratives of a classless society, social origins play an increasingly important role in determining future life-chances in America. Economic inequality in the United States is now at its highest since the Gilded Age, and rates of intergenerational mobility are now lower than in many other Western industrialized nations (Björklund and Jäntti, 1997; Couch & Dunn, 1997; Saez, 2008).

Although sociologists have studied macrolevel aspects of class formation and reproduction for over a century, how class distinctions are produced and reproduced on the ground in everyday social interactions has received far less empirical attention (DiMaggio, 2012). As with other forms of inequalities, class inequalities are driven not only by differential access to resources,

such as paychecks and prep schools, but also how we fundamentally perceive ourselves, others, and appropriate behavior in particular social settings (Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012). Yet, despite a robust literature analyzing how interpersonal dynamics contribute to sex and race inequalities (Ridgeway, 2006), the social sciences have yet to develop a clear and convincing theory of the microdynamics of social class.

This omission can partly be attributed to traditional intellectual boundaries between academic disciplines. Class historically has been the purview of sociologists, who typically privilege macrolevel and historical explanations of social phenomena, leaving the study of cognition and interpersonal dynamics to psychologists (Lizardo, 2006). Similarly, while there are entire sub-disciplines within psychology devoted to analyzing cognition and interpersonal interactions, social class has historically been seen as a variable that is too structural for psychological inquiry. Consequently, cognition and interpersonal interaction were often bracketed as too “micro” for sociologists, while class was tabled as too “macro” for psychologists. However, the cultural turns in both sociology and psychology—which sparked interest in how attitudes, norms, values, and modes of seeing and doing in the world influence social outcomes—as well as the recent financial crisis have inspired interest in unpacking the interpersonal dimensions of social class (Markus & Fiske, 2012).

In this essay, I integrate classical and cutting-edge research across disciplines to illuminate how social perception and interaction both shape and are shaped by social class. My goal is not to provide a new or exhaustive theory of the microdimensions of social class but rather to bridge previously disconnected literatures on social class, highlight ongoing issues in the study of social class, and outline promising directions for future research. Rather than perpetuating disciplinary silos, I organize the essay by concept rather than by field of study.

CLASSIFYING CLASS

Before proceeding, it is important to note that class is a notoriously tricky concept to study empirically, particularly in the United States. Even today, despite empirical evidence to the contrary, national narratives assert that economic and social positions are achieved, and success or failure is largely attributable to individual effort and character rather than social origin. In addition to a reluctance to acknowledge class-based differences in the United States, class itself is a messy analytical construct. While scholars typically agree that social class has something to do with one’s relative socioeconomic rank within a society and it influences the life chances of oneself and one’s children, there is ongoing debate as to how we should

measure class (Goldthorpe & Chan, 2007; Grusky & Weeden, 2001; Wright, 2000). Is class income? Education? Occupation? Wealth? A combination thereof? Are two classmates that graduated from the same college together, but one earns \$35,000 per year and the other \$350,000 in the same class? Is a professor who holds a PhD in Comparative Literature and a plumber who did not finish high school, both of whom earn \$45,000 per year members of the same class? Does subjective or objective class rank matter more? Should we measure class by social origin or destination?

When trying to pinpoint what constitutes to the core of social class, turning to public opinion surveys gains researchers little ground. Americans have a notoriously limited vocabulary for discussing social class. Their categorizations of their own social class are often inaccurate, and Americans often see themselves and the boundaries between social groups more in terms of occupational and moral terms (e.g., “hardworking”) rather than social class (Lamont, 1992).

Still, even if we lack a definitive measure of it, whether measured by money, morals, or college matriculation, class still exerts a profound effect on individuals’ life chances and is worthy of study. As DiMaggio (2012, p. 19) summarizes. “That the language of class does not come easily to Americans, nor do they appear to have stable understandings of their class positions, does not mean that we cannot study the effects of socioeconomic status on interaction.” Many core subjects of social scientific inquiry, such as inequality, human capital, and cognition are multidimensional constructs that likewise are difficult to capture with a single measure. Rather than getting stuck on debates about which single, national-level variable best quantifies class, I argue that studying class from the bottom up—understanding how socioeconomic rank (in all its sundry forms) shapes how we experience the world in everyday life—can provide important insights into how and why particular dimensions of socioeconomic privilege and underprivilege influence future economic and social positions.

COGNITIVE STYLES

Class exerts important effects on individuals’ cognitive styles—how they process information and perceive the world.¹ Scholars have identified three key differences in the cognitive styles of different social strata: preferences for abstraction versus concreteness; holistic versus particularistic thinking; and trust in authority versus the self. Although there are national differences in cognitive styles (Lamont, 1992), there is burgeoning evidence to

1. Cognition involves conscious and unconscious processes; social class affects both (Grossmann & Vanum, 2011).

suggest that such class-based differences are not unique to the United States (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011).

First, the cognitive styles of different social strata can be distinguished by preferences for abstraction versus concreteness. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) suggested that individuals born into different economic strata learn class-consistent norms, values, modes of interpretation and experience—a cognitive structure he collectively refers to as the *habitus*—through early childhood experiences in the home and at school. In many ways, the habitus serves as a class-tinged pair of spectacles; one attends to different features of the environment and sees some objects and pursuits as more or less desirable (or possible) depending on the specific lenses put in the frame. The level of material and social resources readily available in children's home and school environments influence the content of each class's habitus; therefore, Bourdieu argues, the cognitive styles of different social classes can be categorized according to their *distance from necessity*. Concerned primarily with everyday survival needs, members of lower classes tend to prefer objects, opportunities, and experiences that have practical and immediate use value. By contrast, freed from the material constraints of mere subsistence, members of the higher classes gravitate towards goods and practices that are more ephemeral, abstract, and complex in nature and value form over function. Empirical research has confirmed such class-based differences in cognitive styles, ranging from what types of music and entertainment we gravitate toward, to how we unconsciously process visual and verbal stimuli (Grossmann & Varnum, 2011; Kane, 2003).

Second, recent research has shown that class-based cognitive styles differ in their emphasis on particularistic versus holistic thinking. According to such perspectives, growing up in a resource-rich environment with many choices at one's disposal fosters an inwardly oriented cognitive style among the middle-class characterized by *individualism*—a vision of the self as autonomous and in control of its own fate. Middle-class youth come to perceive the external environment as something they can manipulate, influence, and change rather than something that acts upon them. By contrast, working-class individuals are more resource-constrained and thus more dependent on the external environment to meet their physical and social needs. Consequently, with fewer opportunities to exert choice and influence, they develop an outwardly focused cognitive style characterized by *interdependence*—a more holistic vision of the self that is dependent on the external environment and linked to structural opportunities and the fate of others (Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011).

Finally, members of different social classes place more or less emphasis on authority versus self-reliance. In line with a more interdependent cognitive

style, members of the working class tend to place more trust in authority and prize behaviors that emphasize obedience and conformity (Bernstein, 1971). Conversely, consistent with an independent cognitive style, middle-class individuals tend to privilege freedom, self-expression, distinctiveness, and self-reliance (Lareau, 2003; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).

Although seemingly benign, such differences in cognitive styles play important roles in shaping individuals' ultimate social and economic trajectories. As Bourdieu (1984) noted, shared worldviews and preferences within each class facilitate feelings of class identity and solidarity, influencing who we do and do not enjoy interacting with. Indeed, sharing a worldview is an important predictor of whether or not two people will develop a trusting relationship and with what degree of intimacy (Vaisey & Lizardo, 2010). In addition, shared cognitive styles foster common goals and aspirations among members, steering channel individuals into class-consistent educational and occupational trajectories (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; McLeod, 1987; Willis, 1977). One way in which they do so is through shaping individuals' theories of success and failure. Experimental research shows that middle-class individuals tend to explain events in terms of personal and dispositional terms; specifically, that people's behaviors and situations are a result of their individual characteristics, effort, and skills. Working-class individuals, by contrast, are more likely explain events in terms of external factors, such as available opportunities, chance, and luck (Stephens *et al.*, 2011). These theories of success influence how individuals perceive the economic and educational opportunities available to them; the degree to which they believe they have control over their futures; how they go about achieving desired educational and career goals; and which types of educational and occupational environments they find to be comfortable versus alienating.

Compounding such self-selection, key gatekeeping institutions, such as the educational system, are designed from the perspective of the cognitive styles of the privileged classes, which may be reflected not only in official academic curricula and school values but also factors as subtle and seemingly minor as classroom design (Bernstein, 1971). Consequently, students from working-class backgrounds, who are less accustomed to norms of abstraction, individualism, and self-reliance, may find school environments prizing these qualities to be foreign, even jarring; teachers may interpret such dissonance as an indicator of lower academic abilities, social skills, or work ethic, potentially resulting in lower grades or exclusion from prestigious educational tracks (Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Such effects persist even at the university level. Nicole Stephens and her collaborators argue that college—portrayed at the great equalizer in American society—is organized around middle-class values of

individualism, such as independent learning, self-expression, uniqueness, and leadership, which are at odds with working-class values of interdependence, collaboration, helping others, and community (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). In a series of studies, they found that this mismatch resulted in higher stress levels among working-class college students, greater feelings of isolation and other negative emotions, and significantly lower grades (Stephens, Townsend, & Markus, 2012). Highlighting the importance of matches in cognitive styles between students and educational environments for future academic success, when they conducted a field intervention in which college freshmen orientation materials presented college as an interdependent rather than independent endeavor, working-class students' negative emotions significantly decreased and class-based academic achievement gaps disappeared (Stephens, Fryberg *et al.*, 2012).

Moreover, class-based cognitive styles not only influence how we perceive ourselves, others, and the environments we inhabit but also serve as "scripts" (Goffman, 1981) that delineate appropriate behavior within the gatekeeping institutions that sort individuals into various educational and occupational tracks that offer different levels of economic and social rewards. In her study of class-based parenting practices, Lareau (2003) found that, consistent with externally orientated cognitive styles, working-class parents adopted a child-rearing strategy she terms *natural growth*, a belief that children thrive when they are left to develop on their own and in the hands of trusted school authorities. By contrast, middle-class parents adopted a strategy of *concerted cultivation*, the view that children are projects that need to be carefully nourished and attended to in order to succeed. Informed by these parenting scripts, middle-class parents were more likely to advocate for their children in schools, be actively involved in the classroom, assist children with homework, provide additional educational enrichment activities at home, and enroll their children in structured out-of-school activities. Such actions helped facilitate student success in the classroom and foster more positive impressions of students by teachers. In addition, the norm of enrolling children in structured leisure activities at young ages not only equips middle-class children with increased opportunities to develop social and interactional skills (including with other adults, skills that Lareau suggests will later be valuable in the workplace) but also provides them with important extracurricular credentials that serve as vital prerequisites for elite college admissions (Stevens, 2007) and access to the nation's highest-paying, entry-level jobs (Rivera, 2011).

INTERACTIONAL STYLES

In addition to influencing how we perceive the world, class also shapes interactional styles in face-to-face settings. Researchers have found distinct patterns of class-based nonverbal communication. In line with an inwardly focused cognitive style, middle-class individuals tend to be less interpersonally engaged during face-to-face encounters. In a series of experiments involving interactions between two strangers, Kraus & Keltner (2009) found that middle-class individuals were less likely to make eye contact, demonstrate listening cues when the other person was speaking, and were more likely to display distraction behaviors, such as doodling while the other person was talking. Conversely, working-class individuals were more interpersonally engaged and displayed more active listening cues and increased attention to their interaction partners. Moreover, these nonverbal patterns seem to signal a person's social class position to others. The authors found that students who watched silent clips of these pairs interacting could correctly identify each individual's class position with surprising accuracy, partially based on these nonverbal patterns. Because they are more attuned to the nonverbal and verbal cues of others, working-class individuals tend to be more attentive to the emotions of others and are better able to identify them accurately. In addition, they are more likely to help and share resources with others, leading researchers to suggest they are more pro-social and altruistic in interpersonal settings than middle-class individuals (Kraus, Côté, & Keltner, 2010). Granted it is important to emphasize that such results were found in experimental contexts where individuals are interacting with strangers for relatively low-stakes rewards. In higher-stakes settings, middle-class disengagement could be attenuated. For example, although there are upper-class biases in professional hiring (Rivera, 2012), one cannot imagine that a job candidate checking his/her cell phone during a law firm job interview would warrant high marks; to the contrary, eye contact, active listening cues, and forward-leaning posture are associated with higher interview scores and greater likelihood of hire (Rivera, 2015; Staw, Sutton, & Pelled, 1994).

In addition to the gestures we use, class is also embedded in verbal cues. Similar to Bourdieu's notion of distance from necessity and preferences for abstractions versus concreteness, Bernstein (1971) suggested that working-class individuals were more likely to demonstrate what he termed a *restrictive* linguistic style, characterized by simpler words and grammar and practical rather than theoretical content. In addition, the presence or absence of a regional accent can signal social class. Just as the difference between Cockney and Posh in England, whether one says "wahtah" or "wahterr" can mark whether one grew up in South Boston or Beacon Hill.

In both sound and style, language serves as an important status marker that individuals use to evaluate the social, intellectual, and moral worth of others (Riches & Foddy, 1989). For example, teachers and employers may privilege the language of the more privileged classes, interpreting these linguistic styles as evidence of heightened intellectual and social abilities, helping to channel higher-class individuals into more prestigious educational and occupational paths (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

INTERACTIONAL CONTENT

Such class-based cognitive and interactional styles work together with differences in interactional content to affect interpersonal attraction and evaluation in face-to-face encounters.

Whether it's the "name game," where people try to identify mutual acquaintances, asking someone where they grew up or went to college or what types of sports or music they like, seeking out commonalities in knowledge, experience, and interests is typically the first thing two people do upon meeting (DiMaggio, 1987; Erickson, 1996; Rivera, 2012). Discovering these types of underlying similarities binds individuals together, facilitates trust and comfort, and makes us like the other person more (Byrne, 1971; Collins, 2004). Linking conversational content back to cognitive orientations, cultural knowledge and personal experiences are colored by both class-based preferences and material barriers to entry. Returning to Bourdieu's concept of distance from necessity, members of the privileged classes tend to prefer activities and topics that are abstract in nature, have aesthetic or intellectual value, are not directly useful, and require large investments of temporal and monetary resources; members of less-privileged classes prefer activities that have immediate emotional or practical value and require lower material barriers to entry (Bourdieu, 1984). Indeed, whether we prefer opera or soap operas, bowling or badminton, Nascar or Nabakov, our tastes and interests bear the imprint of social class (Kane, 2003). Given that discovering common interests and experiences in conversation is a critical basis of interpersonal attraction and trust, we are more likely to experience feelings of comfort, ease, and "chemistry" with people who come from similar social class backgrounds (Bourdieu, 1984; DiMaggio, 1987). Such processes contribute to a segmentation and stratification of social networks—and the social and material resources to which our ties connect us—by social class (Wimmer & Lewis, 2010).

However, more than just sources of liking, societal gatekeepers use the presence or absence of commonalities associated with social class to evaluate the worth of others and distribute valued rewards. In a study of interviews between college counselors and community college students, Erickson and

Schultz (1981) found that establishing similarity was critical for whether a counselor believed a student had potential for future success and delivered a positive recommendation. Comembership could occur on various lines, but similarities in experience and culture were most crucial. In a study of hiring practices in elite corporations, Rivera (2012) found that job applicants who displayed class-based commonalities with their interviewers were more likely to receive positive hiring recommendations. Yet, because not all societal gatekeepers come from higher-class backgrounds, having a wide cultural repertoire from which to draw to establish commonalities with *anyone* one depends on for access to valued resources can facilitate educational and occupational success (Erickson, 1996). Perpetuating existing class inequalities, members of higher classes are most likely to exhibit such cultural breadth that is useful for advancement (Peterson & Simkus, 1992).

EMBODYING CLASS

Finally, class is made salient in social interaction through the body. Whether the weathered hands of the manual laborer, the straightened and whitened teeth of the middle classes, or the smooth foreheads and svelte yoga arms of upper-class women, experiences of privilege and underprivilege are inscribed in our skin and muscles (Bourdieu, 1984). For example, individuals who live in low-income neighborhoods have less access to healthy, nonprocessed food; partially for this reason, obesity is significantly more common among the lower classes (De Schutter, 2011). Consequently, we can judge someone's social class with a surprising degree of accuracy just by sight (Kraus & Keltner, 2009).

Class also manifests in what we choose to put on our bodies. Whether it's the subtle stitching on the back pocket of an up-and-coming designer's jeans signaling a three-digit price tag to those in-the-know, the frayed edges of a faded dress shirt signaling age and use, or a Yale Lacrosse fleece, dress is an important marker of social class. Dress, however, is perhaps the least reliable class marker because it is easiest to mimic. Particularly with the spread of the mass media and internet, it's no longer necessary to be physically present to see what's on the runways in Paris or Milan; one can see the latest trends days (or even hours) later and purchase imitations for steep discounts via the internet. Perhaps for this reason, more durable and everyday items such as shoes, watches, and spectacles tend to be seen as more reliable markers of social class (Rivera, 2010). Moreover, what constitutes upper- versus middle- versus working-class fashion varies by time and place. Goods that were at one time markers of privilege, such as the classic Burberry tartan scarf in England, can quickly become a badge of working-class status (Bothwell, 2005).

Still, some patterns emerge. Individuals from middle- and upper-class backgrounds tend to prefer products that emphasize their individuality and make them stand out from the pack, whereas working-class individuals tend to prefer products that make them fit in with others (Stephens *et al.*, 2007). In addition, at least among the upper classes, there is a tendency to prioritize form (e.g., designer, material, history, and mission of the company) over function (Bourdieu, 1984). The intersection between dress and other visible markers of class on interpersonal attraction and evaluation represents a fruitful avenue for future research.

CONCLUSION

In the preceding pages, I reviewed classical and contemporary scholarship on how social class shapes perception and interaction. Social class influences how we perceive the world around us and our role and power within it; which environments feel comfortable versus alienating; how we communicate with others; with whom we will and will not develop positive and enduring relationships; how we feel, behave, and perform in society's gatekeeping institutions; and how gatekeepers evaluate our own social, intellectual, and moral worth. In the remainder of the essay, I highlight promising directions for future research.

CLASSES WITHIN CLASSES

One of the most pressing areas for future research is providing analysis of variations *within* social classes. Class does not exist in a vacuum but rather interacts with other forms of privilege and under-privilege, such as sex and race; each of which is associated with different patterns of seeing and doing within the social world (Lareau, 2003; Ridgeway, 2006). As such, future research should probe deeper into how cognitive orientations, interactional styles, and gestures vary within the upper, middle, and working classes and how social class-based cognitive and interactional styles combine with other status markers to magnify or reduce life chances.

In addition to such demographic distinctions, there are important ideological, cultural, and political divides within classes. Specific interactional styles may be valued differently in particular subgroups within a given social class. For example, a Wall Street banker and a professor, considered by many to be part of the upper-middle class, may have distinctive ways of speaking, dressing, and doing that influence how they are evaluated in various gatekeeping scenarios. Scholars should study variations in cognitive and interactive styles among occupations, geographic regions, and relative economic and cultural rank within a particular social class.

Moreover, there is a pressing need to analyze the upper class. Economic inequality in recent decades has increasingly been driven by gains at the top, making studying economic elites a critical intellectual and social task. However, academics who study social class have been hesitant to identify any class as “upper.” For example, the convention in psychology is to consider all individuals whose parents have 4-year college degrees to be “middle class” (Stephens *et al.*, 2007). Clearly, there are meaningful social and economic differences within this broad and heterogeneous group. Even in sociology, where the study of social class is most developed, the term *upper-middle class* is a catch-all for individuals who are more privileged than the average, college-educated, white-collar worker, such as managers, professionals, and academics. However, is a physician or lawyer who has received the highest degree possible and is in the top 2% of incomes nationally really middle or upper-middle class? With the Occupy Wall Street movement, the top 1% or even the top 0.1% of income earners have entered the national vocabulary as the upper class. Perhaps this is because such individuals are safely distant enough (particularly from those studying class) to be classified as privileged. However, it is important to not to conflate the super-rich with the upper class. The upper class, like other strata of the class hierarchy, likely has multiple levels. Reserving the study of the upper class to the Warren Buffets and Paris Hiltons of the world obscures much of how social origin serves as a basis of domination and subordination in contemporary American society.

SIGNATURES OF UPWARD AND DOWNWARD CLASS MOBILITY

As noted earlier, there is ongoing debate as to which measures of class are more powerful and stable markers of socioeconomic position. However, scholars have noted that there is not a one-to-one correspondence between social origin and destination, or with cultural resources and class position (Kingston, 2001). A promising direction for future research is to analyze individuals who have experienced significant upward or downward class mobility within their lifetimes. Given that outsiders often have unique insights into the norms, manners, and behaviors of a group that are taken for granted and unnoticed by insiders (Simmel, 1908), studying such individuals could illuminate additional cognitive, interactional, and bodily class distinctions that affect social attraction, evaluation, and stratification. Such research could also shed light on the important but understudied question of whether and how class-based cognitive and interactional styles can be learned later in life (Aschaffenburg & Mass, 1997). Certain imprints of class may be more malleable than others. For example, it likely is easier to change patterns of eye contact and speech than one’s unconscious style of cognitive processing.

To conclude, class fundamentally shapes our life experiences and life chances. By understanding how social class distinctions are perceived and enacted on the ground in everyday social interactions, we can develop greater knowledge of how and why social origins affect social destinations.

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