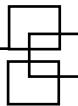


# CHAPTER 1

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## INTRODUCTION: A WIDE-ANGLE LENS ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SOCIAL CLASS

Hazel Rose Markus and Susan T. Fiske

In the United States, people attach particular significance to the ideal of equality. Yet the empirical picture is clear. Social-class differences and the inequality they reflect now organize American society more than ever. Differences in resources and in the associated status and cultural capital influence whether we fight in a war, vote, or get divorced. They matter for the music we listen to, what we eat for dinner, how we talk, how much we weigh, and how long we live. Social class also shapes social interactions in every domain of life, and that is the focus of the current volume—*Facing Social Class*. The contributors—including social psychologists, sociologists, anthropologists, linguists, and legal scholars—illuminate this fact. They report, for example, that doctors, middle class by virtue of their occupation, prescribe simpler treatment regimes for their working-class than for their middle-class patients; that middle-class jurors tend to be more assertive than jurors from the working class; that working-class parents are more likely than their middle-class counterparts to defer to teachers' views of their children; that, relative to middle-class adults, working-class adults are more attuned to the emotions of others and relatively more concerned with helping and giving back to their communities; that working-class or first-generation college students can be disadvantaged by the university focus on self-expression and choice; and that middle- and working-class Americans together perpetuate a broad and deep stereotype of middle-class competence.

With the title *Facing Social Class*, we intend to signal that the comprehensive analyses of the everyday face-to-face social interactions that constitute social life have the potential to markedly extend our current social science understandings of social class. Until quite recently, social psychologists have concentrated their analyses on middle-class North American college students, leaving unexamined the social interactions and psychological tendencies of the working class and the more than 70 percent of

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Americans without a college degree. Sociologists and other social scientists have addressed social class for years, as reflected, for example, in Annette Lareau and Dalton Conley's (2010) *Social Class: How Does It Work?* But on-the-ground interpersonal dynamics that create and maintain social-class differences remain to be understood.

The contributions in this volume show that social class, one of the most powerful ways in which societies rank their members, shapes selves (or identities) and the interactions of these selves. Together, the chapters generate a rich set of new empirical questions, yet they also afford a number of broad generalizations about societal rank and social interaction. Across the research reported here, it emerges that people are constantly and keenly aware of their ranking and that those at the top of the social ladder think, feel, and act differently from those on the lower rungs. This appears to be the case whether one's superior position is objectively anchored with resources and status, subjectively experienced, or manifest through the temporary assignment of power and influence. For example, in the North American settings described here, those with a higher rank have a sense of themselves as independent from others and as influencing and controlling social interactions. Those with a lower rank experience themselves as relatively interdependent with others and as adjusting and deferring to others in interaction. The self in a high-status position is likely to focus on expressing and promoting one's own interests, choices, and goals. The self in a lower-status position is more likely to be relatively socially responsive and to focus on avoiding threat or harm and tuning into others' goals, emotions, and needs. The research summarized here contributes to and creatively extends the analysis of how one's rank in a setting, community, or society is a major coordinate and determinant of behavior at every level.

The chapters here define social class in a variety of ways and analyze multiple forms of social hierarchy and inequality. Some researchers index social class with educational attainment, labeling those with a college degree as middle class and those without as working class. Others use occupation or income or a composite of several factors to categorize people into class groupings. Some focus on the objective indicators of social class using indices of educational attainment or occupational status, while others attend to subjective assessments such as perceived ranking within one's community or perceived financial security. Most of the comparisons discussed here involve people who are working and operating within the mainstream economic system. They do not focus on the nonworking poor. Nor do they consider the very wealthy or the owning class. All authors concur that defining social class is a significant and unmet challenge and that different indices of social class often correlate poorly and do not provide the same pattern of results. They acknowledge that a social-class designation is highly context dependent and that specifying social rank is a challenge; for example, who has a higher social rank, the highly paid woodworker with a high school diploma or the poorly paid substitute teacher with a master's degree? Yet the primary focus in this volume is the influence of one's rank in the social hierarchy, however determined or assessed, on the flow of everyday lived social experience. The emphasis is less on specifying the source of one's social rank than on understanding how social rank is communicated and translated into different types of relationships and into differences in thoughts, feelings, and actions.

The ethnographies, field studies, surveys, and laboratory experiments assembled in this volume demonstrate that social class is not a fixed set of inherent attributes. Neither is it simply a rank or position in the social hierarchy, a marker of prestige or status, or an index of access to or control over material resources. It is all of these, but it is also a form of doing that can pervade thought and action. It is manifest in shared understandings and perspectives and in everyday interaction—in practices of language, caretaking, schooling, money management, religion, health, politics, work, and the media. Social class is among the most significant of all sociocultural contexts, and as such it can have a broad and diverse influence on one's way of being a person (that is, an agent, a self, an identity) in the world.

Understanding the multifaceted psychological consequences of social class requires a view of people as ongoing participants in encompassing social, political, economic, and cultural systems. As indicated in the nested boxes depicted in figure 1.1, individuals—their brains, bodies, and psychological tendencies (box A)—are structured by their everyday social interactions (box B). These interactions are, in turn, organized and animated by larger societal institutions (box C) and historically derived pervasive ideas and values (box D).

The essays in this volume reveal that social class influences all aspects of psychological functioning: how people make decisions; how they perceive and are perceived by others; their sense of self, agency, and identity; their feelings of trust, certainty, belonging, or fit; their orientation to time; their perceptions of health, sickness, and well-being; their social responsiveness to others; their understandings of in-group and out-group and social hierarchy; their attitudes toward politics, religion, and life in general; their hopes and dreams and possible selves. To understand how these psychological tendencies are constituted and maintained, we focus a wide-angle lens on behavior: ideas, institutions, interactions, and individuals.

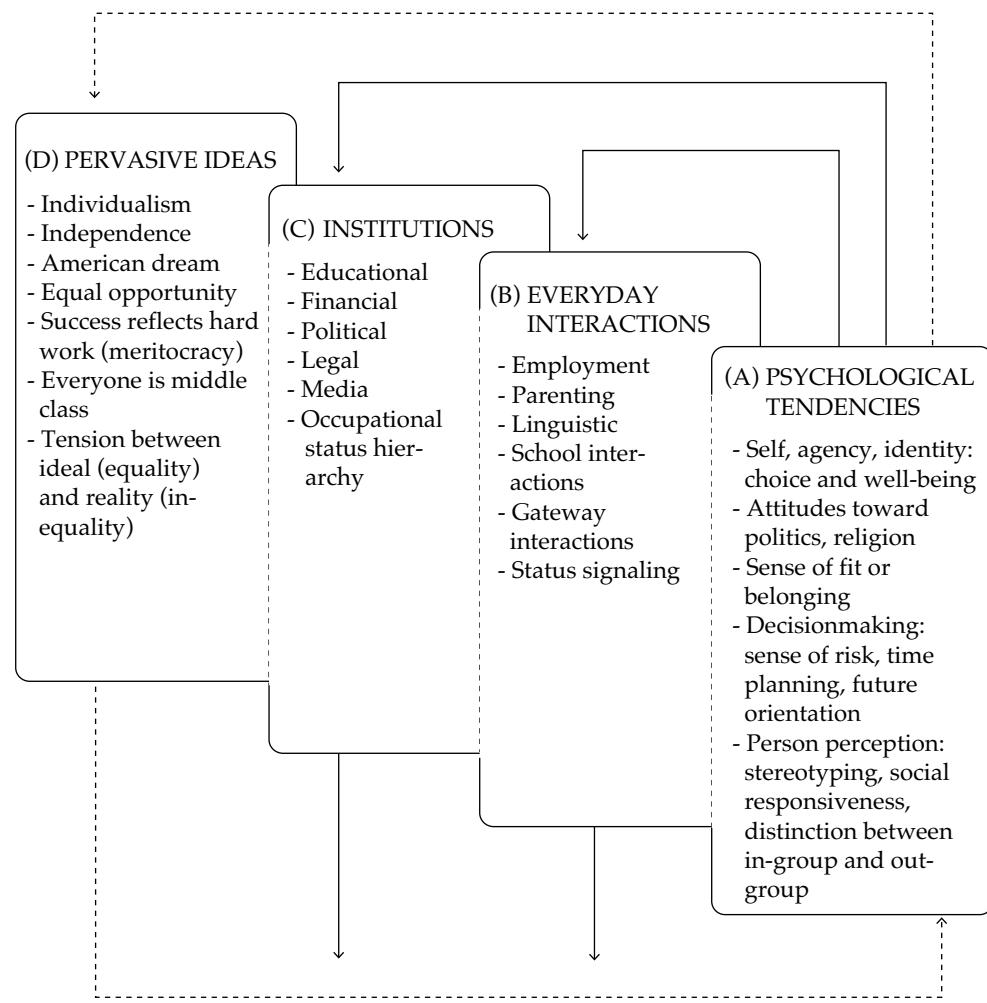
## PERVASIVE CULTURAL IDEAS

Social-class distinctions in the United States are fueled, first, by a particular and historically derived constellation of powerful ideas, tacit assumptions, and cherished ideals. These include the primacy of the individual; a collective fear of the collective; the significance of independence, individual achievement, and hard work as the route to success, happiness, and well-being; and the still powerful although obviously flawed notions that social class is not important, that Americans are all middle class, that opportunity is equal, and that upward mobility reflects ability and effort and thus is fairly earned or merited. The American dream (which holds that anyone—not everyone—can make it to the top with hard work) and the foundational ideal of equality among individuals, coupled with the reality of major and growing inequality, results in a United States-specific set of tensions around the idea of status rankings and social hierarchies. These ideological tensions, and how people engage with them, are significant for understanding why and how social-class position influences behavior.

Social psychologists, both sociologists and psychologists, have grappled with why American social-class beliefs generally support existing inequality, for example, in

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Figure 1.1 Influence of Social-Class Ideas, Institutions, and Interactions on Individual Psychological Functioning



Source: Authors' figure.

this book chapters 5 (the poor economic situation of the working class being widely attributed to their lack of effort), 6 (“deeply held belief” in individual mobility and personal responsibility), and 12 (a cross-class stereotypic link between status position and competence). In sociology, the public ideology advocates working hard to get ahead: ideal Americans ought to, and do, prove their worth through effort (Rytina, Form, and Pease 1970). This belief justifies the current stratification system, and all strata agree in the abstract, although lower strata have more reservations about

whether specific policies actually work. On a related note, James Kluegel and Eliot Smith (1986) show the shared belief system that, assuming equal opportunity, people get what they deserve, and therefore the system is fair. Even those who are massively disadvantaged by the status quo tend to justify the system (Jost and Kay 2010), though people do differ in how much they endorse existing group-dominance hierarchies as necessary and fair (Sidanius and Pratto 1999). All these ideologies reinforce current arrangements that advantage the middle and upper classes over the lower-income and working classes.

Part I of this volume starts with such widespread beliefs about class. Paul DiMaggio (chapter 2, “Sociological Perspectives on the Face-to-Face Enactment of Class Distinction”) examines sociologists’ work on social class and inequality for insights useful to psychologists who study face-to-face encounters, discussing the ambiguity of defining social class conceptually and operationally. Considering together the work of Basil Bernstein on class and language, Pierre Bourdieu on social and cultural reproduction, and Randall Collins on interaction ritual chains, the chapter yields an array of hypotheses focusing on the factors in play when cross-class encounters are more and less successful.

In another illustration of ideology’s role, Joan Williams (chapter 3, “The Class Culture Gap”) discusses the variety of ways that people in different social-class groups reinterpret foundational American ideas. These ideas, in turn, inform the behaviors and daily experiences of the working and middle classes. Using class-divided voting patterns as an example of class cultural phenomena, Williams also explores the different ways in which the social-class spectrum can be divided and discusses pros and cons of each.

## INSTITUTIONAL PRACTICES AND POLICIES

Other chapters analyze how the ideals of equality and the reality of inequality are reflected in institutional practices and policies. Occupation, education, and income index social class, but they create and maintain social-class distinctions as well. The type of access people have to society’s powerful institutions—political, legal, educational, financial, media, and more—and how these institutions function to provide or deny resources, privilege, and standing give rise to and maintain the various psychological tendencies that accompany social class. For example, the psychological tendencies often associated with working-class status are intimately bound up with the factors that reduce life chances in general: highly segregated living conditions that concentrate poverty, chronically low-wage jobs and economic subordination and insecurity, low-quality and inadequately funded schools, political underrepresentation, legal underrepresentation, discrimination, and inconsistent health care.

Part II addresses the influence of social class in American institutions. In chapter 4 (“Class, Cultural Capital, and Institutions: The Case of Families and Schools”), Annette Lareau and Jessica McCrory Calarco delve into class cultural change, showing how interactions between individuals in different social classes can transmit different class cultural capital (that is, the knowledge, beliefs, and behavior patterns used by

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particular class groups). They review class differences in institutional interactions, such as those between teachers and other school administrators. They show how such institutional interactions, although often disadvantaging the working class, also offer a means for the working class to learn and use the middle-class cultural habits that are generally valued more in institutional contexts.

Nicole Stephens, Stephanie Fryberg, and Hazel Rose Markus, in chapter 5 (“It’s Your Choice: How the Middle-Class Model of Independence Disadvantages Working-Class Americans”), examine the way social class shapes agency or capacity to act in the world. They suggest that the middle-class experience allows people to see themselves as independent agents, free to choose their possible selves and to create their future worlds. For working-class Americans, independent agency is largely out of reach, yet this model is taken for granted as the natural, normal, or neutral way of being, built into the social machinery of everyday life. The chapter synthesizes various studies that show how the proliferation and instantiation of the independent model of the self can produce a hidden disadvantage for working-class Americans.

## EVERYDAY INTERACTIONS

In part III, social class is shown to be reflected and maintained through everyday social interactions with teachers, bosses, neighbors, and friends in homes, schools, workplaces, and religious spaces. These are the informal and minute interactions that create and convey the consequences of one’s class status and access to resources. It is in these local worlds that people learn either that the world is safe and welcoming, available for exploration and influence, or that the world is uncertain and threatening, requiring vigilance and toughness.

Peggy Miller and Douglas Sperry, in chapter 6 (“Déjà Vu: The Continuing Misrecognition of Low-Income Children’s Verbal Abilities”) explore class variations in linguistic style, drawing on ethnographic studies of families in different social classes. They show how class differences in parenting practices and daily language are turned into disadvantage or advantage in American educational systems. With vivid examples they demonstrate that schools value the highly individualized, psychologized, and abstracted expressions of experience characteristic of many middle-class contexts and simultaneously devalue the narrative, storytelling style common to many working-class contexts.

In chapter 7 (“Class Rules, Status Dynamics, and ‘Gateway’ Interactions”), Cecilia Ridgeway and Susan Fisk investigate class interactions at the interpersonal level and consider implications of these interactions for systematic group outcomes. Their focus is on “gateway” interactions—those involving people from different class backgrounds that are critical for class mobility. They reveal how these gateway interactions are molded by cultural capital and status assumptions, often leaving those from lower-class backgrounds in an imbalanced situation that is uncomfortable and disadvantageous.

Michael Kraus, Michelle Rheinschmidt, and Paul Piff’s chapter 8 (“The Intersection of Resources and Rank: Signaling Social Class in Face-to-Face Encounters”) explores current literature on the role of social class in face-to-face interactions, especially emphasizing the ways in which social class is signaled in subtle and previously

unexplored ways. For instance, both conversational style and the amount that individuals talk in an interaction track social-class status. The same is true for nonverbal behavior. How close one stands to an interaction partner influences the balance of power in interactions and conveys social class. These social-status signals shape interactions in ways that advantage those from middle-class backgrounds. Furthermore, as these status differences are reflected back to a participant through interaction, they reinforce and influence that person's subjective feeling of status and power.

## INDIVIDUAL PSYCHOLOGICAL TENDENCIES

As a consequence and a cause of the preceding levels—ideas, institutions, and interactions—people walk into cross-class encounters with expectations, habits, heuristics, and predispositions to respond. People acting in concert constitute the higher social levels and are constituted by them. This is the subject of part IV.

Crystal Hall, in chapter 9 (“Behavioral Decision Research, Social Class, and Implications for Public Policy”) reviews the literature on behavioral decisionmaking and suggests new ways, beyond the prevalent models, to think about the role of social-class context in choice and decisionmaking. In particular, she explains how the material resources and the cultural capital associated with social class powerfully influence which psychological tendencies are enabled by different financial decisionmaking situations. She also connects this work to public policy: examining nutrition programs, she shows how the changing availability of healthy foods has a major impact on healthy food choices and decisions about diet among the poor.

From another perspective, Adrie Kusserow, in chapter 10 (“When Hard and Soft Clash: Class-Based Individualisms in Manhattan and Queens”) explores intra-American cultural differences in individualism by investigating interactions among parents, children, and teachers. Social class, she argues, divides Americans into soft individualists, who emphasize emotional expression, creativity, and uniqueness, and hard individualists, who emphasize emotional control, self-reliance, and toughness. These behavioral patterns and value systems, in turn, shape different interactional and psychological outcomes. Kusserow shows with compelling examples that these different patterns have far-reaching consequences for the main engine of upward mobility—children’s education.

In chapter 11 (“Putting Race in Context: Socioeconomic Status Predicts Racial Fluidity”), Diana Sanchez and Julie Garcia highlight the intersectionality of race and class. Across a variety of social contexts, they show how race and class influence one another and moderate relative advantages or disadvantages in social interaction. For example, whites often perceive working-class African Americans as more black than middle-class blacks. Furthermore, as one’s social class changes, one’s own racial identity also shifts, particularly for mixed-race individuals who may identify more as monoracial or multiracial, depending on their current social-class status.

Finally, Susan Fiske, Miguel Moya, Ann Marie Russell, and Courtney Bearns (chapter 12, “The Secret Handshake: Trust in Cross-Class Encounters”) show that mistrust between those of different class backgrounds, fostered by institutional experiences and stereotyped beliefs, can foster inequality through everyday interactions.

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Using the stereotype content model, they investigate affiliative and competence beliefs toward different social-class groups and the role of these beliefs in producing feelings of misfit in cross-class interactions.

What is powerfully apparent throughout the chapters in this volume is that social-class positioning influences all aspects of everyday interaction—how to talk, if to talk and when, whom to trust, whether or not to plan or risk, what can or cannot be done, how to belong, and who to be. Of course, how people respond to these social interactions depends on how social class intersects with the meanings and practices associated with other significant sociocultural categories (gender, race, ethnicity, age, cohort, religion, geography, sexual orientation) that also influence psychological tendencies. As the arrows in figure 1.1 indicate, people create the institutions, practices, and ideas to which they later adapt, and these, in turn, shape people’s behavior in ways that perpetuate them. As people change their social-class positions through education, income, or job status, the nature of the social interactions and the social contingencies of their local worlds will change, and so will their psychological tendencies.

We have ordered the chapters according to their emphasis on one or another of the categories in figure 1.1. We begin with the chapters that focus on pervasive cultural ideas, move next to those chapters that emphasize the way social class is reflected and promoted in mainstream institutions, and then move to the chapters that illuminate everyday social interactions and practices, ending with chapters that concentrate on the consequences of social class for individual psychological tendencies. The considerable literature referencing the biological level of analysis is not examined here (but see chapter 12). Some psychologists have already begun to scan the brain and examine the body for the physical implications of social class. What all of these chapters suggest is the importance of “scanning” social worlds, thus helping us understand how social class conditions and structures people’s worlds and their interactions within it. Social class will be revealed in the patterns of ideas and values, institutional practices, social interactions, and psychological tendencies that people engage in and transmit to one another.

The time is right for a social psychological perspective on social class. We know from a great deal of research in sociology and public health that social class matters for all important life outcomes, but a social psychological perspective (one that takes particular account of the person in ongoing social interaction and the different forms these interactions can take) will help us understand why and how social-class distinctions are made and maintained as well as how they can be undone. All of the chapters in this volume view the study of social class through the wide-angle lens advocated here.

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Together, these chapters provide a substantial basis for further research and suggest a host of significant, unexamined questions. Illustrative issues include the following:

What are the interpersonal signals of social class? Although we have collectively made a start on determining this, how do people know at a glance, for example, who went to boarding school and who did not finish high school?

Cues include clothing, nonverbal behavior, speech, and appearance, all of which have some overlap with power and status indicators, about which we know a lot, but the social-class overlap is incomplete. For example, working-class dominance signals probably differ from upper-class dominance signals in certain ways. Some of these cues make potential employers and social partners decide that this person is not “like us.”

What makes working-class students socially uncomfortable in selective colleges and universities, white-collar settings, and elite resorts? Although we have made a start on determining this, as this volume shows, we could know more about how this sense of displacement operates through self-concept and identity, as well as cultural differences and in-group-out-group behavior that create experiences of ostracism. Conversely, what makes an upper-middle-class person uncomfortable in a blue-collar setting, such as a factory floor, a construction site, a trailer park, or a working-class gym? One displacement matters more than the other because of who holds the resources, but both matter to the ways that people are divided from one another by status.

How do people who have been socialized in working-class contexts fare in the institutions that have been shaped by middle-class standards and rules? Are those without the middle-class experience—of being called on to develop one’s own attitudes and ideas and to defend one’s own versions of reality—at risk for being persuaded, bullied, or taken advantage of? Are they, for example, more likely to be victims of discriminatory workplace practices or to be induced into false confessions? How do people who cross over from working-class to middle-class contexts fare in the elite professions? What personal factors and social contexts determine success? What is the empirical evidence for Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb’s *Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972)? When and how does social-class status become a source of stereotype threat? What are the costs and benefits of working-class tendencies toward constant vigilance to prevent unsustainable risks? What are the strengths and benefits of working-class culture? Should perpetuating professional middle-class cultural ideas and practices be the goal of mainstream institutions?

How do family ties both bolster and impede the upwardly mobile working class and poor? We know that working-class students in elite colleges and universities who maintain responsibilities and responsiveness to families endure much more difficult challenges than do their middle-class peers. The costs of caring for at-risk families are high, but the costs of deserting them would be higher. What are students’ differential costs by social class of being alienated from family?

How well do “mixed” marriages work? What expectations do distinct social classes bring to close relationships? What gender, work, and parenting norms differ, and how do these play out when class cultures combine?

Who subscribes to what lay theories (attribution) about social class and therefore acts on them? We know that, in general, conservative interpretations endorse meritocracy and that liberal interpretations endorse circumstances. But

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how do these system-justifying and system-challenging beliefs play out across blue-collar, middle-class, and high-income conservatives and liberals? What are the ideas and social interactions that maintain the view that social class, status, and inequality are natural and inevitable and obscure the understanding that these are social distinctions of one's own making and thus malleable and changeable?

What is the route to quantitative understanding of Bourdieu's and Paul Fussell's astute observations of class aesthetics? How do we define and measure habits, sensibilities, and rituals? How can the insights of ethnography, surveys, systematic observation, and laboratory experiments be more effectively integrated to deepen our understanding of how social class works?

How are the super rich different from the rest of us, besides the fact that they have money? What is their gated habitat? How do they use their money and status to influence politics? How do they feel about rising inequality?

How do we define class psychologically, not just by socioeconomic variables? How can we distinguish between class and status and which might be prestige and which might be power or control over resources? What are the psychologically important social-class categories? The chapters here concentrate on comparisons between middle class and working class but use different defining criteria. Should the middle class be divided into two classes, separating the upper or professional middle class from the rest of the middle class? What distinctions should be made between working class and very low income or poor?

How should we refer to people participating in different social-class contexts? Labeling people in our studies as "middle class" or "working class" inevitably encourages the essentialist idea that people in different classes have different attributes or qualities that impel their behavior. These labels work against the most important insights of the volume. Social class (like gender, race, and ethnicity) is an ongoing system of social distinction that is created and maintained through implicit and explicit patterns of social interaction. Labels such as "people engaged in middle-class contexts," although less convenient, can highlight the importance of analyzing people as responsive to the normative ideas and practices of their contexts.

Our goal in this volume is to draw together new and heuristic research focused on the way social class shapes social behavior. Our hope is that the findings and insights of the chapters that follow stake a claim for the importance of facing social class.

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