

Understanding Social Class as Culture by Andrea Dittmann

“What choices have you made for yourself?” questions the admissions page of a top US college. The recruiting page of one of the country’s most elite workplaces asks: “Do you love a challenge? Seek the opportunity to have your ideas heard at the highest level?”

Does anything stand out about these questions to you? Perhaps not. Or perhaps they remind you of some classic American ideals:

- independence,
- freedom of expression,
- bold individualism.

These are the basic building blocks of the American Dream.

Questions like these that espouse independent ideals are not only littered throughout the recruitment sites of prestigious universities and workplaces, they are, in fact, pervasive in American society. While research suggests that these independent ideals tend to be viewed as normative in mainstream American society, **they are often in tension with the norms of a significant contingent of the American population: members of the working class.**

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- differences between the culture and norms of the middle class,
 - which are institutionalized in American society, and
- those of the working class, which are not.

In recent years, the gap between the rich and the poor has grown to an unprecedented ratio. Upper-income families now have an average net worth that is nearly 70 times greater than that of lower income families. In working to uncover the underlying drivers of this ever-growing wealth gap, social scientists have realized that one of the key psychological sources of this growing inequality seems to lie in the

- differences between **the culture and norms of the middle class**, which are institutionalized in American society, and
- **those of the working class, which are not.**

Just as **cultural psychologists** have studied the ways in which an individual’s nation of origin serves as a source of personal identity, **psychologists of social class have begun to unpack the ways in which individuals’ class position contributes to their sense of self.** The results of this growing body of research on the psychology of social class suggest that, in addition to considering visible markers such as gender and race or ethnicity, so too

- **should social class be incorporated into the larger dialogue about culture and diversity in the United States.**

The **culture of the middle class** is consistent with the classic ideals championed in the quotes opening this article: our ability to make choices, pave our own paths, and voice our ideas and opinions. For individuals from middle- or upper-class backgrounds, these norms make sense. They tend to live in a relatively certain world where their basic needs are met. Whether they can afford to have a roof over their heads and a meal on the table is rarely an issue.

The **culture of the working class** looks quite different. Rather than primarily highlighting independence, it also heavily centers on interdependence: the ability to adjust to the situation, build community, and be responsive to others. Again, researchers emphasize that these norms make sense for working-class individuals. Unlike their middle- and upper-class counterparts, working-class individuals tend to live in a more uncertain world. They are more likely to be living paycheck to paycheck, without a financial safety net, so their social relationships are key to their survival.

These differing **social class cultures** have real consequences for issues like the growing wealth gap. Not only can **different social class cultures** lead to distinct patterns of interpersonal behavior, they can also lead individuals to experience mismatches between their **social class culture** and the culture of important social institutions like college or the workplace. Further, researchers have begun to uncover some of the potential downsides of institutionalizing the middle-class culture of independence.

Research by Paul Piff and colleagues suggests that individuals from middle class backgrounds are more likely to behave unethically than individuals from working class backgrounds. Piff and colleagues also find that individuals from working class backgrounds tend to behave more pro-socially and altruistically than individuals from middle class backgrounds. The difference in behavior is likely the result of the emphasis middle-class culture places on the self and individual choice, versus the emphasis working-class culture places on community and relationships with others. Piff and colleagues' research starts to illuminate some of the potential downsides of upholding middle-class norms of independence as the cultural ideal.

Another potential downside to institutionalizing middle-class norms of independence is the perpetuation of inequality. Nicole Stephens and colleagues find that when working-class individuals, who rely more on norms of interdependence, encounter signals of middle-class norms that laud independence—like the college and job application prompts mentioned at the start of the article—a “**cultural mismatch**” may occur. This cultural mismatch can lead working class individuals to feel as though they do not belong in these institutions and can increase stress levels, ultimately undermining their performance.

We need to think carefully about the **societal norms** we take for granted—they're **likely class-bound** and not necessarily beneficial.

For example, first-generation students exposed to a message that framed university culture as independent performed significantly worse than their continuing-generation counterparts on two common academic tasks: solving anagrams and tangrams. When asked to give a speech after reading a similarly independent message, first-generation students displayed greater increases in the stress hormone cortisol and more negative emotions than their continuing-generation counterparts.

At a societal level, the disparities in graduation rate are stark: according to a recent Pell Institute report, just 11 percent of low-income, first-generation college students attained a Bachelor's degree within six years of enrolling in college. What was the rate for their non-low-income, continuing-generation counterparts? Nearly 5 times greater. Given the importance of a college education for upward mobility, this research suggests that the

dominance of middle-class norms of independence in American institutions can put working-class individuals at a disadvantage, which in turn, can fuel and perpetuate inequality.

Understanding social class as culture is a relatively recent idea, yet the research conducted thus far illustrates **the influence class position can have on people's behavior and identity**. The research also sheds light on how these individual-level processes can feed into macro-level phenomena, such as the growing wealth gap, via social institutions like our colleges and universities.

These findings also **point to the importance of considering social class as a critical source of diversity** that, *while not necessarily visible in the way that a person's gender or skin color may be, can still substantially impact a person's lived experience*.

Much work remains to be done to more fully **understand the role of social class at both the individual and societal level**, but it is clear that we need to think carefully about the **societal norms** we take for granted—**they're likely class-bound** and not necessarily beneficial.

As we work as a society to embrace cultural diversity, we'd do well to embrace class diversity too.

This is a copy of "Understanding Social Class as Culture By Andrea Dittmann August 12, 2016 <https://behavioralscientist.org/understanding-social-class-as-culture/> Words in bold and italics are done by johnharrisloflin@yahoo.com the Chair of Southeast Working-Class Task Force, Indianapolis.

Andrea Dittman is pursuing a Ph.D. in management and organizations at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management. She studies the effect of social class and social rank in workplaces and organizations.