Class differences
Social status isn't just about the cars we drive, the money we make or the schools we attend — it's also about how we feel, think and act, psychology researchers say.

By Tori DeAngelis
February 2015, Vol 46, No. 2
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University of California, Irvine, professor Paul Piff, PhD, starts his courses on class differences by asking students about their consumer habits: Do they shop at J.C. Penney or Neiman Marcus? What kind of car do they drive, if they drive at all? What is their preferred breakfast, a fruit smoothie from Starbucks or a Dunkin' Donut?

"As people reconstruct their days, it's clear that in every single decision they make, class is an essential feature," says Piff.

The implications are larger than breakfast choice, he adds. "Class affects whether someone is going to be accepted into a particular kind of school, their likelihood of succeeding in that school, the kinds of jobs they have access to, the kinds of friends they make" — in essence, the degree of status, power and perks people enjoy or lack in their daily lives.

But until the last decade or so, the concept of class has generally eluded psychological inquiry. While sociologists and epidemiologists have examined its effects in broad domains such as health outcomes and mortality, few researchers have explored how we process class internally and psychologically.

Yet several factors make the psychology of class an increasingly important topic to study, some researchers say. One is the widening gulf between rich and poor, and the potentially negative effects this gap has in areas including health, well-being, self-image, relationships, stereotyping and prejudice.

Studying the psychology of class is also important because it puts a contextual spin on what has largely been an individually oriented view of psychological processes, says Michael Kraus, PhD, who studies class at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "It suggests that the contexts we grow up in and are socialized in are an important part of what shapes the self," he says.

That said, these researchers see class on a continuum, rather than as a fixed distinction among upper, middle and lower class. In their view, the higher in socioeconomic status you are, the more independently oriented you are likely to be, while the lower in status you are, the more group-minded you are likely to be, for example.

"At least in the studies we've run so far, we've found that middle-class folks are more independent than lower-class folks, but less so than their upper-class counterparts," Kraus explains.

A theory of classism
In a 2012 paper in Psychological Review, Kraus, Piff, University of California, Berkeley, psychology professor Dacher Keltner, PhD, and colleagues posit that social class — which they define as "a social context that individuals inhabit in enduring and pervasive ways over time" — is a fundamental lens through which we see ourselves and others. Because lower ranking people have fewer resources and opportunities than those of relatively high rank, they tend to believe that external, uncontrollable social forces and others' power have correspondingly greater influence over their lives. Success for them, therefore, depends on how well they can "read," rely on and help out others, the psychologists' theory holds.

By contrast, those who enjoy more resources and greater class status live in contexts that enhance their personal power and freedom — larger and safer living spaces, the means to buy high-priced goods and experiences, and education that provides access to influential people, ideas and venues. These conditions give rise to a more self-focused approach to
life, the theory states.

"With wealth and privilege comes this island of sorts, this increased insularity from others," as Pfiff puts it.

Another important aspect of the theory is that rank is, in part, subjective and relative. All relationships are marked by class scrutiny: Am I higher or lower than this person? Research also shows that people tend to be quite accurate in their assessment of their own and others' class rank, and that this self-assessment likewise predicts outcomes. For example, people who perceive themselves as lower in rank have worse health outcomes overall than those who see themselves as higher ranking, research finds.

Class effects

Given the advantages that come with higher class, it's not surprising that those of higher rank tend to deploy actions and attitudes that maintain or justify their position. A 2013 paper by Kraus and Keltner in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, for example, found that people who see themselves as relatively high class are more likely than those who see themselves as lower in rank to view class as inherent, innate and fixed. Higher-class people also are more likely to endorse punishment over rehabilitation for criminal offenses, and to see the world as a just and fair place.

"We're finding that the super wealthy tell a story about why they have what they have," says Keltner. "In essence, they believe they're a different kind of person, with genes more suitable to success."

People of higher self-reported socioeconomic status and more educated parents also score higher on measures of entitlement and narcissistic personality tendencies than people not in their class, finds a 2014 article by Pfiff in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. Research suggests that perhaps because of this sense of entitlement, higher-class people can behave more selfishly and less ethically than lower-income peers. In a 2012 article in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, Pfiff and colleagues describe two studies in which observers watching from the street recorded driving behavior over two days. In the first study, drivers of high-status vehicles were far more likely than others to cut off other drivers at a busy four-way intersection. In the second study, approximately half of the drivers in the highest status vehicles drove illegally through a crosswalk as a pedestrian was waiting to cross, versus none in the lowest status vehicles.

These findings suggest that cultural context and its resulting mental habits allow people of higher classes to disconnect from others' concerns, says Keltner. "To be compassionate, you have to carefully attend to other people — to what they're thinking, feeling and saying," Keltner says. "The wealthy don't do that as well as poorer people — not because they don't have those capabilities, but because the context of their lives allows them to disengage." In other words, having more space, material goods, money and free time makes it easier for wealthy people to buy their way out of problems, take a vacation when things get stressful, or otherwise avoid or mitigate everyday stresses. Consider the person who can afford to have a contractor re-do her kitchen, versus someone who must borrow money for the job, try to do the job herself, or simply live with old equipment that doesn't function properly or is even dangerous.

One outcome of these differences is that people of lower rank tend to be more emotionally attuned to others, these researchers contend. A 2010 paper in *Psychological Science* by Kraus and colleagues, for example, reports that less educated people are better than more educated peers at identifying emotions on faces. They also are more accurate at reading a stranger's emotions during a group job interview. Another study finds that people with less income and education are more generous, trusting and helpful than their wealthier, more educated counterparts (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 2010).

Not all psychological factors associated with being on the higher end of the social hierarchy are negative, however. One psychological plus may be that people with power and influence have more freedom to be themselves without worrying about adjusting to others' expectations or wishes. A 2011 study by Kraus and colleagues in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, for instance, finds that people with more self-defined power — an ingredient often associated with higher classes — were more likely than low-power people to report having a coherent self-view.

"The good news about having influence and control is it's really freeing," Kraus says. "High-power people stay authentically the same person no matter the context. But people who are relatively low-power change little aspects of themselves because having low power means having to adapt and fit in to different contexts."

Fortunately, it's also relatively easy for wealthier people to realign connection and compassion. In Pfiff's study of entitlement, he asked high-status people either to list three benefits of regarding others as equals or three things they did during an average day, testing them with measures of narcissism and sense of entitlement before and after the exercise. The scores of wealthier participants in the "equal" group dropped significantly, he found, while those of wealthier people in the second group remained at the same high levels.

"If you bridge the island that separates the wealthy from the rest of the world, then all of a sudden empathy gets restored,"
Class culture

In another line of research, Stanford University psychologist Hazel Markus, PhD — well known for her work on how sociocultural factors such as race, gender and ethnicity influence our thoughts, feelings and self-perceptions — has been applying this framework to class.

In a 2005 paper in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology reporting on three studies, Markus and her then-graduate student Alana Conner Snibbe, PhD, showed that college-educated participants were much more upset when they didn’t receive an item they had hand-picked than were working-class peers. Like the theory proposed later by Kraus, Pfiff and Keltner, they also found that working-class people tend to believe that maintaining relationships and fitting in are more important than expressing preferences and standing out in a crowd (Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 2007).

Markus and an international team of researchers are now examining how class intersects with other forms of culture, such as nationality. In a 2013 article in Emotion, Jiyoung Park, PhD, Markus and colleagues found that class influences the way people in different countries view and express emotions. Comparing American and Japanese respondents, for instance, they corroborated an earlier finding that lower-status Americans are more likely than higher-status Americans to express anger, especially when it involves frustration. In Japan, however, those of higher social standing were more likely to express anger than lower-status participants, especially when it involved making important decisions.

As this work suggests, class is not set in stone, an observation some researchers are using to help people from working-class backgrounds better understand their culture and hence perform better in school.

In the June 2012 issue of the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Northwestern University psychologist Nicole M. Stephens, PhD, Markus and colleagues demonstrated that simply giving a certain kind of welcoming message to incoming first-generation college students from working-class families can profoundly influence their performance. One study found that when these students received independent messages highlighting college as a place for personal exploration and individual achievement, they performed worse than middle-class peers on verbal and spatial tasks. But when they received interdependent messages — greetings that included references to their families and to college as a place to collaborate with their peers — they performed as well as students from college-educated families, a finding replicated at several universities using a number of different tasks.

Similarly, Stephens and colleagues report in an April study in Psychological Science on what happened when they randomly referred incoming freshmen from working-class backgrounds to one of two student-led discussion panels. In one panel, juniors and seniors talked informally about how their class backgrounds raised obstacles to college success and how they overcame those obstacles. In the other, they talked about obstacles and overcoming them, but without reference to class.

At the end of their first year, working-class students who attended the "class" condition had much higher grade-point averages than those in the control condition, and about the same GPAs as students from higher class backgrounds, the team found.

The studies suggest that "if we can raise people's awareness about how people's social class backgrounds matter in college," says Stephens, "we can give them insights that can help them to better navigate their college experience."

Meanwhile, Indiana University sociologist Jessica McCrory Calarco, PhD, has been looking into what might cause cultural differences in academic attitudes and performance in the first place. For two years, she observed a cadre of working- and middle-class kids from the third to the fifth grade, and interviewed the kids, their parents and teachers. In a study in the October American Sociological Review, she reports that middle-class youngsters who were struggling received more attention from teachers because they more actively sought it out, while working-class kids tended to keep quiet because they didn't want to bother the teachers.

Interviews with parents shed further light on these behaviors: Middle-class parents perceived it as their right and duty to take part in the system, while working-class parents felt it rude to insert themselves too much in their children's schooling. As a result, working-class parents "tended to be less aware of what teachers expect today, and hence less apt to encourage their children to seek help with their school challenges," Calarco says.

As the world continues to shrink, it's more important than ever that we understand the subjective nature of such cultural dichotomies, Markus adds.

"Social class differences come about because of the ideas and values you are surrounded by, the types of social interactions you have at home, school and work, and the sorts of institutional practices and policies that are common in
your community," she says. "That means that these differences are not immutable."

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