

# Culture and Social Class

## ***Social class is forever***

Political and economic systems come and go, races are socially constructed and deconstructed, empires rise and fall, cultural traditions evolve and change; but the common factor through all of these myriad expressions of human social organization is socio-economic class. Social class has been addressed in philosophy, economics, and political science for thousands of years in the traditions of several of the great civilizations. This chapter treats it as a cultural and social phenomenon.

Social class did not disappear on November 9, 1989. Some political scientists, such as Francis Fukuyama, suggested that the fall of the Berlin Wall and the defeat of the Soviet Union in the Cold War indicated that capitalism and liberal democracy were destined to become the dominant economic and political forms throughout the world. Communism was associated with class conflict and sought to polarize the classes in order to imbue the working class with a consciousness of its situation and its options within the capitalist system. However, the apparent defeat of communism did not render everyone suddenly middle class, classless, or satisfied with their lot in life; fundamental differences in classes continue to exist as a force with modern, liberal democracies. Capitalism is heralded as the best of all economic systems, so far, but has inherent problems (“contradictions”) connected to social class evolution and change. In this chapter, I will outline the cultural and social forces at work in maintaining a class society, and the social effects of class distinctions.



**Fall of the Berlin Wall.** *Capitalism über alles?*

## ***Classism***

We are all *of* and *in* a social class. We are *of* the class that our parents occupy, born into it just as we were born into a nation and thrown into its culture. We don't deserve our class (or national) ascribed status, regardless of what it is (in contrast to cultures that believe in reincarnation). We *in* the class that we rose to or fell to as adults, although this achieved class standing may be more expectational than realized prior to completing our educations. When we discuss class (just as when we discuss culture), we are speaking from the perspectives of our own class affiliations. There is no neutral, outsider perspective in the idealized sense of the anthropologist performing field research; we are participant observers. This embeddedness in our subject matter means that we have to be very careful to recognize our class biases and class-based perspectives.

Psychologists—academic as well as applied—work in middle or upper-middle class



**Disdain for, but fascination with, the royalty we escaped.**

social settings that mold middle class values, regardless of the class background of the psychologist. One is hard-pressed to imagine a scientific discipline that is working class in its attitudes, values, activities, and settings. Lacking an unbiased approach to the subject matter, we must be vigilant to classist judgments.

While scientist can and must strive to be fair-minded in approaching this subject, normal people are not bound by scientific values, and often exhibit classist attitudes and behaviors. America is an anti-class society that, at once, believes all people are equal, realizes they are not, disdains inherited wealth and European royalty, is fascinated by the “lifestyles of the rich and famous,” resents the elite’s power and privilege, yet seeks to have such power and privilege. American society is at once open, fair, and mobile; yet closed, unfair, and established. Anyone can become rich or powerful; yet few actually rise precipitously from modest beginnings. In the end, class is power:

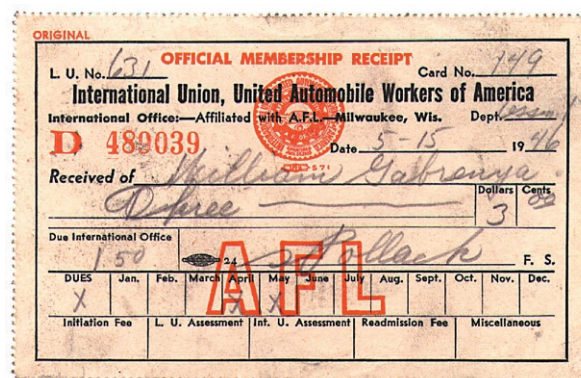
Categorization of groups of people into upper and lower strata, into superior and inferior, is done by those who require such categorization to maintain their power, prevent others from obtaining an equal share of resources, and sustain the myth of superiority (Williams, 1993; in Lott, 2002).

The manner in which psychologists, normal people, government, and institutions treat the lower classes is termed “cognitive distancing” by Lott (2002). She shows how this distancing (a poor term) is expressed in the way the poor are treated in the domains of housing, health care, tax policy, access to legal resources, and social value in the society. Taken together, these “distancings” have some of the features of other “isms,” such as racism and sexism.

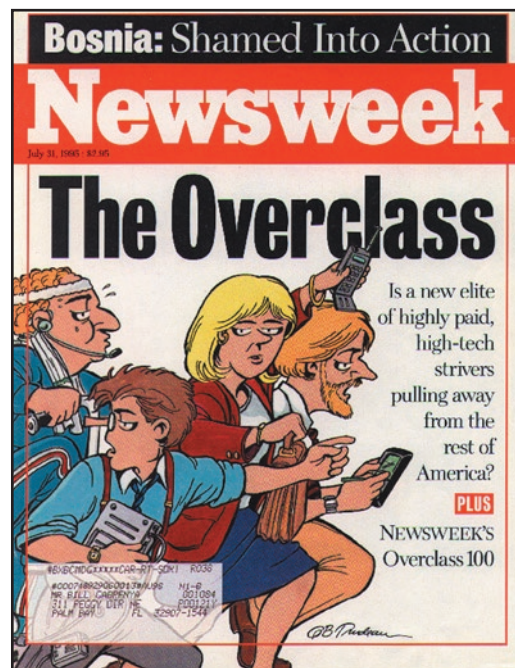
### Defining Social Class

Social class is conceptualized in various ways as a function of the theoretical or political orientation of the writer; much like “personality” is defined differently by psychologists who hold different theoretical perspectives. To Karl Marx, people’s social class membership was determined by their relationship to the means of production, that is, by what they did within a society’s way of producing goods and services. Marx saw two classes, capitalists and workers. Capitalists owned the means of production (factories, businesses, etc.) and workers labored in them. Other Marxists added a third class: the bourgeoisie (boo-zhwah-zee), composed of small businesspersons, experts, and the major professionals (doctors, lawyers, professors). The bourgeoisie shares features with both owners and workers. Marxism is partly an analysis of the relationships among these two or three classes in the context of supposedly-inevitable changes in economic and social systems.

Sociologists often use a simpler and less ideologically loaded approach to social class, conceiving it as one kind of social strati-



**Working class family.** A receipt for the author’s father’s union dues immediately following WWII. Unions are one of the few sources of power available to working class people.



**Inventing the Overclass.** Newsweek’s attempt to identify a new social class category (based on a Doonesbury cartoon).

fication. Social stratification is the ubiquitous characteristic of societies to organize people in a hierarchy of levels or “strata” on a variety of dimensions. These dimensions include power, wealth, social status, education level, prestige of one’s occupation, social standing, and many others. Social class is usually studied by comparing people along three closely related stratification continuums, educational attainment, occupational prestige, and sometimes wealth or income. Using this approach, Hollingshead developed a commonly-used method for combining education and occupation into a single measure, the 5-level Hollingshead Index. The U.S. Census Bureau combines education, occupation, and wealth in its index. Complex and comprehensive measures of occupational prestige have been generated by empirical research, the most well-known of which were presented by Treiman and his colleagues, e.g., Ganzeboom and Treiman’s International Occupational Prestige Scale. For example, university professors have an average prestige score of 78 on this scale (psychologists are probably above other professors for obvious reasons), auto body workers are 41, and so on for hundreds of occupations.

### **You Are Where You Live (YAWL)**

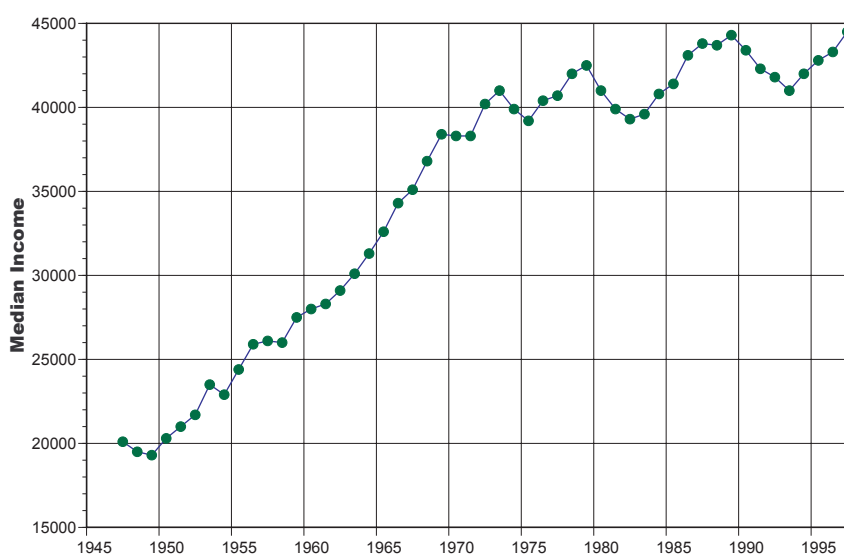
Your zip code tells marketing folks what to pitch to you. See <http://cluster2.claritas.com> to see who you are from a marketing point of view.

Do people know what class they are in? Not really, at least not in America. Most working class Americans believe they are middle class, and American political discourse emphasizes the idea that “regular people” are middle class. This middle class bias is deeply rooted in American culture and may explain the failure of the United States to form a labor party. American psychology, a middle class enterprise, is seemingly equally blind to class. However, social scientists are trained to ask the question, “what’s really going on here?” and take a hard look at class dynamics in ways that often make lay people uncomfortable. This chapter is intended to be uncomfortable.

## **Class in America**

Class and class conflict pervade the history of the United States, as well as all Western nations. The decision to import large numbers of African slaves in the 1600s has been attributed, in part, to Southern land owners’ fear of the power of a growing, dissatisfied white landless laboring class, the “giddy multitude.” The subsequent American revolution had a significant class conflict component, and the 1987 (i.e., current) Constitution is often portrayed as a reaction against the gains made by the working classes after the revolution. The 19th Century battles over the gold versus silver standards, the rise of the Progressive movement in the early 1900s and the struggles of labor unions for well over 100 years are chapters in American class dynamics.

Economists and sociologists track trends

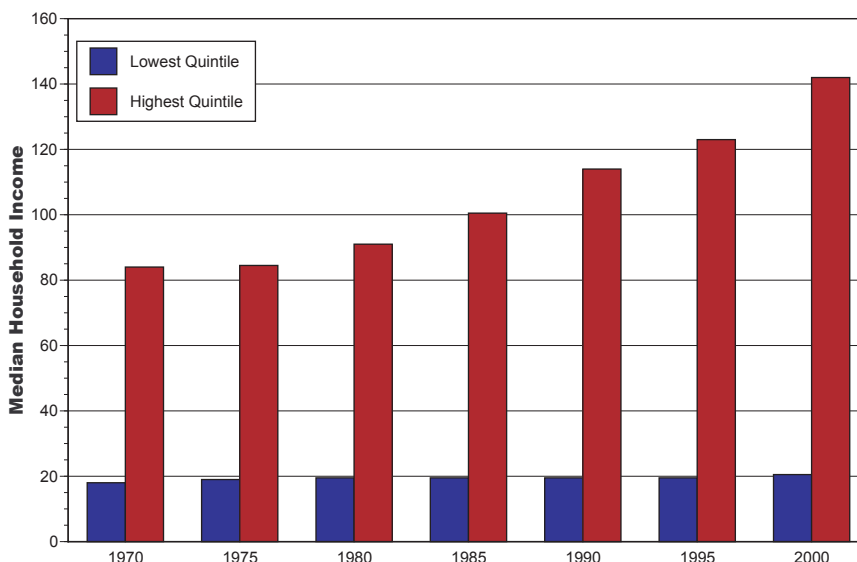


**Median Family Income.** Note the steady increase in income during the post-WWII era up to 1970, then the slower increase with larger downswings during recessions. Values are in constant 1997 dollars. Source: US Census

in the distribution of wealth and other stratification variables (e.g., education) over time. Key variables include the poverty rate, the distribution of wealth, and the gap between the rich and the poor. Political scientists are interested in how political decisions and economic policy changes (e.g., tax policy) affect these variables.

In 1940, near the end of the Great Depression, over 50% of Americans lived in poverty. The figure fell steadily until about 1970 and bottomed out at 11% in 1973. It has varied in the range of 11% to 15% since then.

(These and other data in this section are from the U.S. Census Bureau unless otherwise noted.) Family income rose precipitously from WWII to 1970, then rose more slowly with periodic large declines since. The rapid decline of poverty and increase in income from the 1940s to about 1970 can be attributed to the prosperity that followed WWII, a period during which the U.S. controlled the world financial system and dominated manufacturing. By 1970, the relative degree of U.S. dominance had declined and the problem of energy supplies had become acute.



**Increasing Income Gap.** Median household income for the lowest and highest fifths. Values are in constant 2000 dollars. Source: US Census

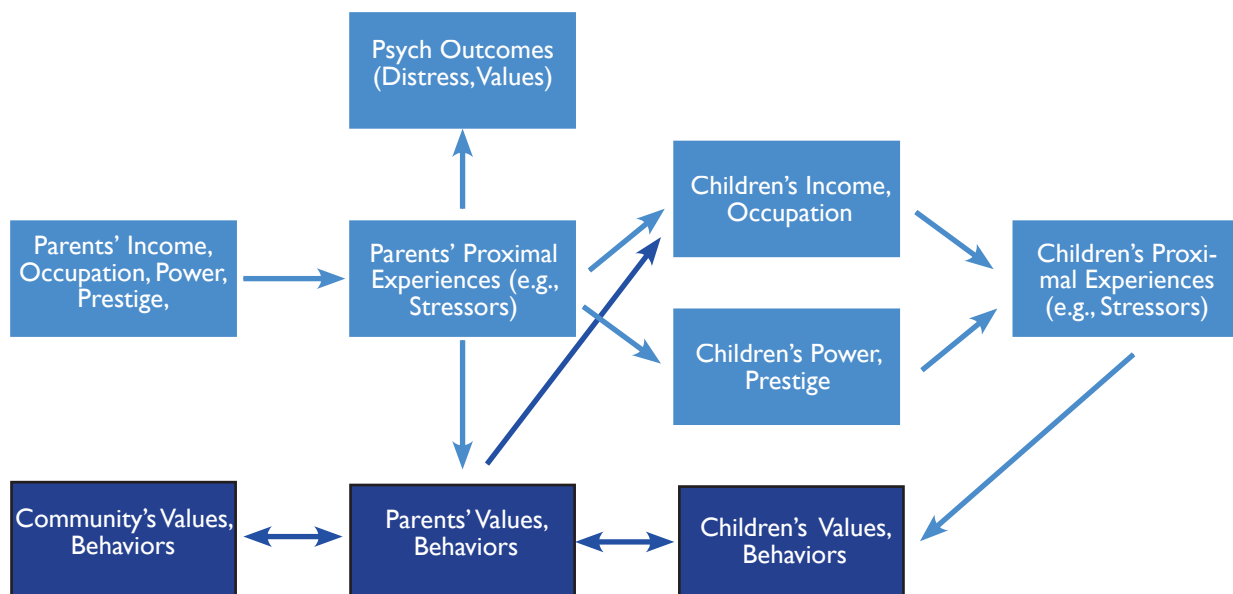
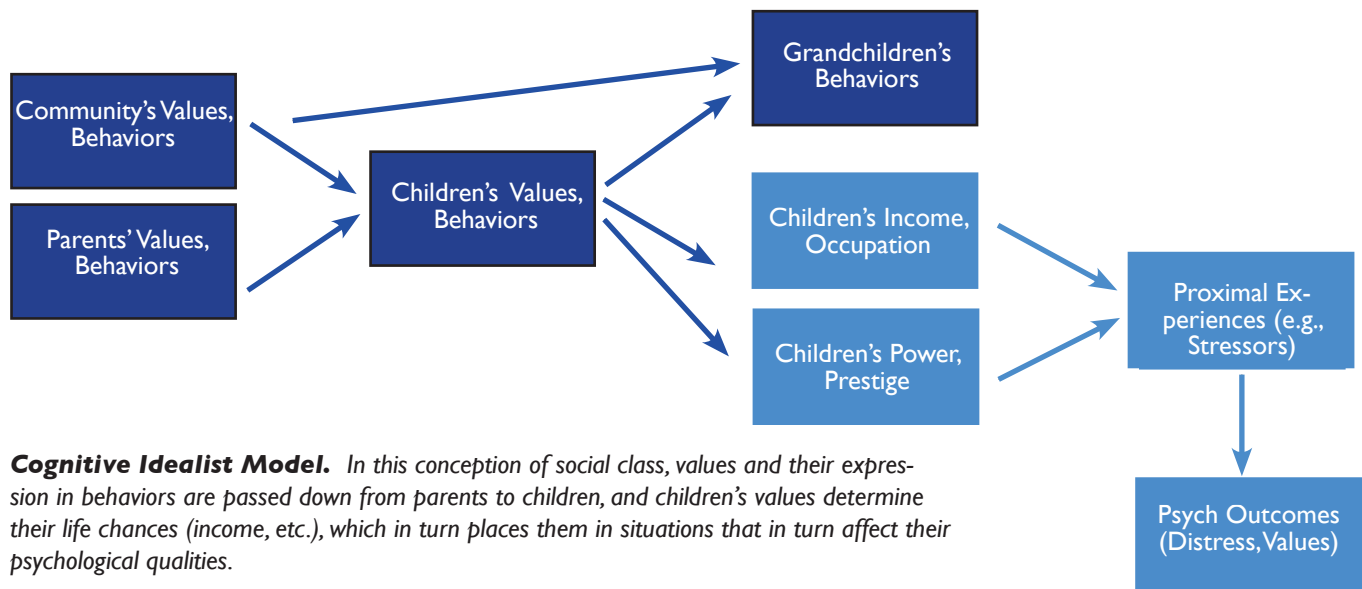
The disparity between rich and poor—economic stratification—showed a very different pattern from that of poverty and income. Up to 1969, the disparity generally declined, but it has increased rapidly and consistently to the present. The boom years of the 1990s witnessed the greatest increase in the size of the income gap, teaching us this important lesson: social class in America is more, not less, important in the post-Cold War era. This increasing disparity poses a serious threat to American democracy and the success of a pluralist society.

### **Social Class is a Cultural Phenomenon**

Modern views of culture recognize just how complex the concept is in several different ways. One complexity is the variation in values, beliefs, and practices within a society that is assumed to share a single, homogeneous culture. These divisions are often identified in ethnic communities, regional variations, city versus rural people, and sometimes in religion, gender, and age. (Cross-cultural psychologists have recognized that taking cultures apart like this calls into the question the utility of a unitary culture concept.) Social class is one of the divisions that we must take into account to understand a society's culture.

Culturalists can often be divided into two “camps” in their conceptions of culture. (But of course it's never this simple, and some theories are in both camps.) In one camp, which I will refer to as the materialist/ecocultural conception of culture, culture is thought of behaviorally and situationally. It is what people do, day to day, in the context of the situations they find themselves in. These situations are themselves a result of how the society maintains itself by producing goods and services





("infrastructure"), and how it organizes itself to get this work done ("social structure"), both of which are also a part of culture. The situational contingencies for a person in a hunter-gather society are remarkably different than those for someone in a wet-rice agriculturalist society (China) or industrial society. People in different cultures have different ideologies about life because they live different kinds of lives.

The ideological/cognitive camp sees culture as an ideological system. Culture is the values, rules, norms, religions, scientific theories (right or wrong), and symbols that can be identified in a society (whether or not they can be found in the same way in everyone's heads). Cultures differ enormously in how they think about things, especially religion, and these differences taken together are what we think

of as cultural differences. People in different cultures have different ways of living because they think about things differently. This latter view of culture, sometimes called the “cognitive turn” in social science, represents the more popular position right now.

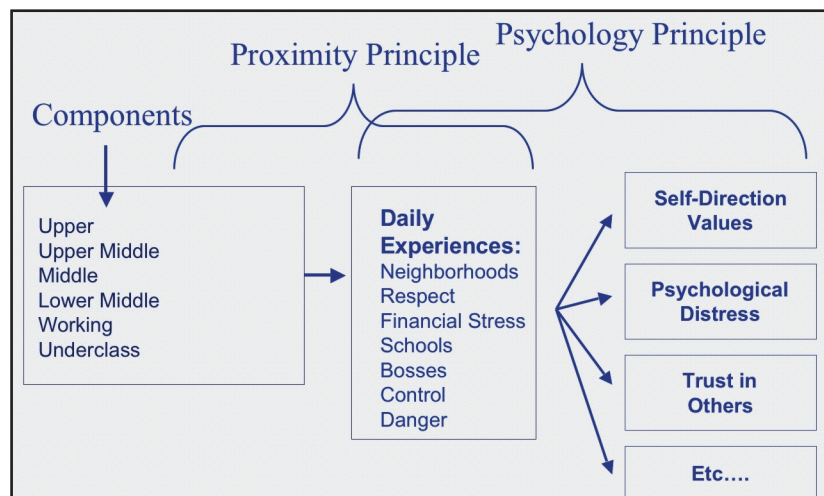
Social class is a cultural phenomenon from both of these points of view. From the materialist/ecological perspective, people in different social classes face different situational contingencies because they participate in different parts of the economic system. To a certain extent, they participate in different infrastructures (or different ecological niches) because they are involved in different activities to produce goods and services and make a living. Managers think, work with data, and boss people around; laborers sweat, work with machines, and take orders.

From the ideological/cognitive perspective, social classes live in communities that share different versions of the culture’s ideology. Classes differ in values and beliefs about the right way to live, practice different variants of the same religions, have different political and social attitudes, and so on. These class-specific ideologies are not learned by experience, but rather are passed down over generations within families and communities through socialization and enculturation practices.

### **Linking Social Structure and Psychology**

The relationship between social class and psychological processes and outcomes must be carefully delineated. House (1981) proposed a model for understanding the links in this relationship that corresponds in some ways to an ecological cultural analysis. He suggested we must specify four “principles” of the relationship:

the components principle, the proximity principle, and the psychology principle. The components principle refers to the manner in which we distinguish social classes, such as the Marxist and Hollingshead systems described previously. The proximity principle is our understanding of the relationship between social class and life experiences that are closely (proximally) related to class membership. For example, what is the effect of having higher (or lower) income on life experiences such as obtaining housing, paying bills, and leisure activities? The psychological principle is most difficult: how do these proximal experiences affect psychological processes or variables? For example, what is the psychological outcome of experiencing low status and power in a job? (For the answer, see Kohn’s research, below.) A rigorous understanding of the psychology of class requires careful specification of these three principles.



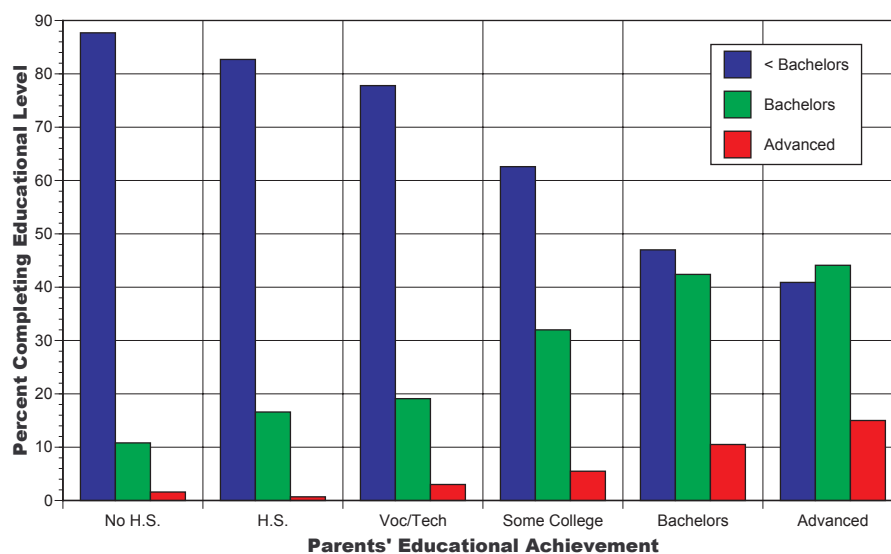
### **Social Class Affects Life Chances**

In the same manner that children born into different societies grow into different sorts of adults, children of different social classes are sent on divergent life

trajectories. Some of the earliest class differences children experience are the conditions that lead to higher or lower “status attainment.” From a materialist perspective, children differ across classes in the situations that encourage and support educational attainment; from an ideological perspective, they differ in parental attitudes both toward educational and intellectual pursuits and toward expectations for success.

Research on social class and educational attainment supports this process. The U.S. Department of Education tracked 14,000 students who were high school sophomores in 1980 to determine their educational achievement by 1992

(they were allowed a lot of time to finish their educations). Children of parents who did not complete high school had an 11% chance of completing a Bachelor’s degree. The chances rose steadily as a function of greater parental education, up to 42% for children whose parents completed a college degree. Is it a matter of intelligence, educational experiences, or financial support for going to college? Yes. Research shows that social class is related to intelligence and achievement scores in elementary school and to SAT scores in high school. Some reasons for this difference are discussed below. But class seems to matter apart from its affect on academic ability. When we look only at the students highest in academic ability (SAT scores, high school GPA, etc.), upper middle class students have a considerably greater chance of finishing college or graduate school than working class students. When we look only at the low-ability students, this class difference is even larger. In other words, if you are not very bright, it really helps to come from an upper middle class family.



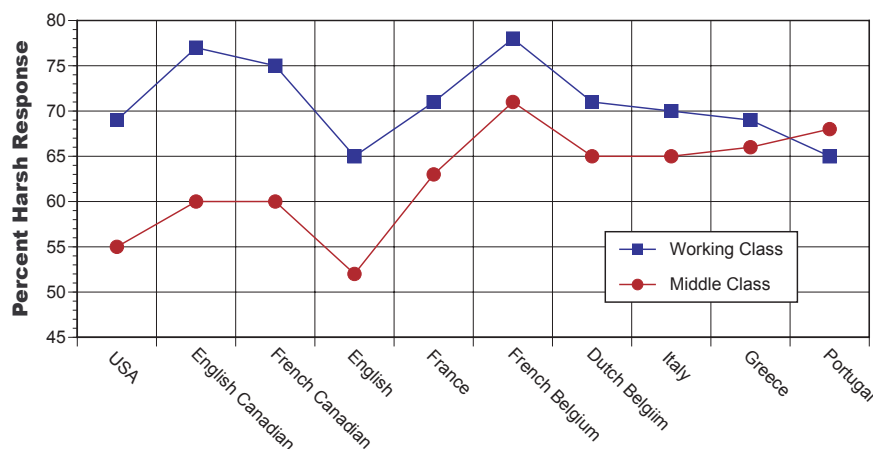
**Educational Achievement.** Children’s educational achievement as a function of their parents’ achievement. Source: US Dept of Education

## Social Class and Child Rearing

Child-rearing practices are studied intensely by cross-cultural developmental psychologists because we assume that it is through child-rearing that cultural differences in personality (defined very broadly in this field) are produced. From a culturalist perspective, if social classes are viewed as cultures or subcultures, then they should evidence somewhat distinct child-rearing practices. They do.

One of the most striking illustrations of class differences in child-rearing was drawn by a multi-nation research program conducted by Wallace Lambert and his colleagues (ref). This team journeyed to England, France, Belgium, Greece, Portugal, Italy, Japan, Canada, and the United States. In each nation (and in the two main cultural regions of Canada and Belgium), they interviewed middle class and working class mothers and fathers (except in Japan) who had young children. Parents were asked to listen to audio tapes of a six-year-old boy or girl misbehaving or acting

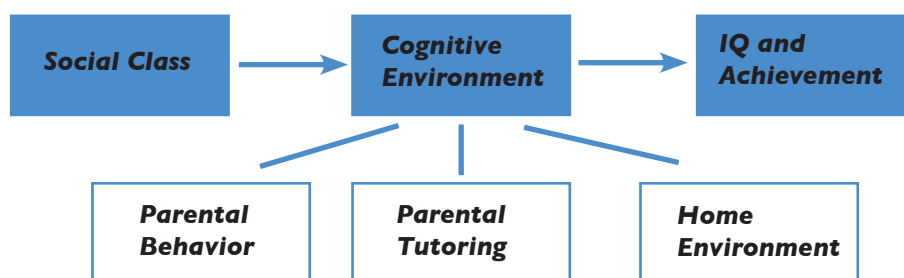
outsider their gender roles, and were asked how they would respond if their own boy or girl acted in this manner. The behaviors are familiar: throwing a temper tantrum, being insolent, picking on a younger sibling, asking to bring friends into the house, etc. One of the most important measures was how harshly parents said they would respond.



**Temper tantrum control.** In all but one country, working class parents said they would react more harshly than middle class people if their child threw a tantrum.

The greatest overall influence on harshness of discipline was not culture, parents' sex, or child's sex; it was social class. Consistently, with very few reversals, working class parents in all sampled nations were more harsh than middle class parents. The primacy of class over culture in this mostly Western sample of nations points to an important development in modern societies: the major distinction in the immediate life experiences of people is more a function of their roles in the economic system than of the surrounding cultural milieus. The American factory worker has more in common with the French factory worker than both do with white collar workers in their respective nations. A factory is an ecological niche that one has to experience to appreciate.

*The cognitive environment.* The effects of social class membership on test scores and life-chances described previously are partly mediated by the "cognitive environment" of children's households. The cognitive environment concept combines elements of both ecological and ideological conceptions of culture in that family living situations and resources as well as parents' values and beliefs come into play. It has three components. First, classes differ in the general characteristics of parents in the home: their values, behavioral styles, interests, leisure activities, speech habits (e.g., use of standard English). Children pick up attitudes toward school (and smoking cigarettes) from enculturation in the family. One measure of this environmental influence is how children are included in parents' conversations at the dinner table, and what they talk about.



Second, middle class families perform more parental tutoring than working class families. Parental tutoring is a type of informal (outside school) education: correcting children's speech habits ("don't say 'aint!'"), intentionally teaching skills through games and hobbies, encouraging diverse interests, and building "culture capital." Culture capital is a store of knowledge, skills, and experiences that children acquire mainly outside of school through music lessons, extracurricular activities, foreign travel, etc. Many of these activities are quite expensive and only upper middle class families can afford them. In the 1990s, a "minivan" culture developed in the



American suburbs, parents shuttling their kids around town from lesson to practice to tutor to club. The “soccer mom” became a political demographic category.

Finally, the home environments of working and middle class families tend to differ. Middle class (especially upper middle class) households present more intellectual stimulation and fewer anti-intellectual distractions than working class households. Stimulation is in the form of magazines, newspapers, educational devices (computers, sort of), original art, and what’s playing on TV or radio. Anti-intellectual stimulation includes television, television, and also television. Before home computers became entertainment devices, the ratio of computers to TVs might have been a useful measure of this environmental factor.

*The digital divide.* Social class and racial differences in computer use and access to the Internet have been noted. For example, in 2001, adults with professional degrees were twice as likely to use the Internet as adults with high school diplomas. Among families that do have a computer, a larger percent of time is devoted to playing games (versus seeking information and other activities) in working class than in middle class families (US Census Bureau).

Q: What is the single best predictor of children’s IQ?

A: Whether or not the family has a library card

### **Digital Divide Online**

#### *Public Broadcasting System*

See [www.pbs.org/digitaldivide](http://www.pbs.org/digitaldivide) for the PBS documentary on the digital divide.

#### *Digital Divide Project*

See [www.washington.edu/wto/digital](http://www.washington.edu/wto/digital) for the University of Washington’s Digital Divide Project.

Altogether, this three-factor cognitive environment variable accounts for much of the difference in test scores across social classes. For a humorous but accurate examination of class differences in family life, see [www.pbs.org/peoplelikeus](http://www.pbs.org/peoplelikeus)

## **Social Class and Value Inculcation**

Cross-cultural psychology has become obsessed with the study of values, including their structure, dimensionality, differences across nations, and relationships with a variety of societal-level and individual-level phenomena. Unfortunately, the nature of the research, depending as it does on samples of college students and others in middle class occupations, has failed to look at subcultural effects such as social class. An important research program carried out over several decades by the sociologist Melvin Kohn has focused on class differences in values.

Kohn’s research was informed by the materialist/ecological approach that sociologists sometimes label the “social structure and personality” or “sociological psychology” version of social psychology. This approach begins with social stratification and asks, what are differences in life experiences in different strata, and how do these experiences affect psychological processes?

To Kohn, the key effect of social class is what people experience at work. These work experiences are expressed in home and family behavior and ultimately in the values acquired by children. Work has three components: complexity, routinization, and closeness of supervision. Middle class jobs are complex in their use and analysis of information, not especially routine in their hour-to-hour and day-to-day diversity, and are performed relatively independently and distally from supervision. (I’ve been at home now for two days writing this chapter, and my department chair neither knows nor cares what I’m doing.) The prototypical working class factory

worker, in contrast, generally performs manual tasks repeatedly, under constant supervision. These three job experiences can be summed up in the concept “occupational self-direction (OSD),” which is contrasted on a continuum with conformity. Not surprisingly, Kohn found that middle class people work for intrinsic rewards (what I/O psychologists call Theory Y) while working class people work for extrinsic rewards such as money (Theory X).

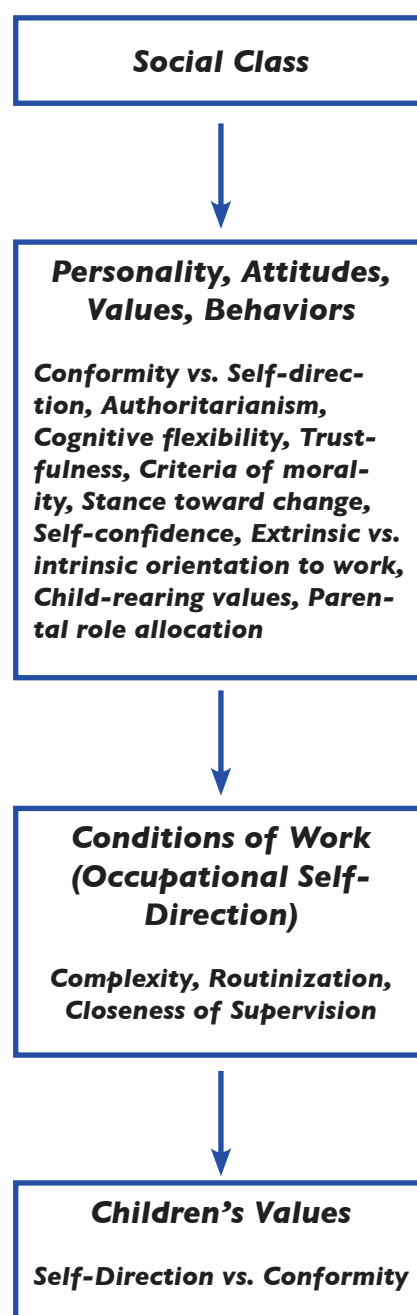
Parents, consciously and unconsciously, raise their children to be like themselves, so the OSD of the parent comes home and influences child rearing practices. Kohn’s research has shown that middle class parents emphasize self-directed values in their children, while working class parents emphasize conformity. The ideal middle class child is an independent thinker, sometimes requiring considerable tolerance on the parents’ part until the child’s thinking makes any sense. The ideal working class child is obedient and well-mannered, doing the right thing and staying out of trouble. Kohn found, for example, that middle class parents punish their children on the basis of the intentions of their acts, while working class parents punish on the basis of the outcomes of their acts. (“I made a mistake and totaled the car” versus “I totaled the car.”)

Kohn’s research program has been carried out in the United States, Japan, Poland (under Communism), Taiwan and elsewhere with essentially the same results. Regardless of culture or economic system, modern societies have occupational hierarchies in which some people plan and manage, and others labor. Although all of these nations, especially the U.S., facilitate class mobility (rising or falling in class over generations), research on life chances shows consistency over generations. Both as a cause and a consequence of this intergenerational class consistency, parents pass their values down to their children. From a functionalist perspective, this is a rational because it prepares children for the lives they will probably lead. From a culturalist perspective, it is simply a culture’s way of raising its children to live in a society, or more specifically, a particular strata of a society.

The harshness of discipline findings in Lambert’s cross-national study, presented previously, begin to make sense in this context. Working class people work in more physically difficult and dangerous jobs under closer supervision and are expected to conform more than to think independently. Harsh discipline reflects the experiences of the parents on the one hand, and prepares their children for these experiences on the other. Are parents totally conscious of how they are raising their children, and the values they impart? Probably not; this is what makes psychology interesting.

### **Social Class and Social Values**

The idealist/cognitive understanding of culture emphasizes cultural differences in values and beliefs, without necessarily worrying about where these ideological entities came from. Research on class differences in social values and beliefs demonstrates clear cultural differences. Only a few of these differences will be presented here. These findings are from Kohn’s studies (ref) and National Opinion Research Center (NORC) surveys.



*Trustfulness.* Middle class people are generally more trustful of others. This finding is parallel to that of cross-cultural research on modernity, in that people who live in modern societies (e.g., industrialized nations) are more trustful than those who live in traditional societies (e.g., agricultural and underdeveloped nations). In both cases, trustfulness is probably a social belief passed down across generations as well as a response to situations encountered day-to-day in the workplace, neighborhoods, and in relation to the economic system.

*Fatalism.* Fatalism is the belief that one lacks control over one's life experiences and "what will be, will be." Working class people are more fatalistic than middle class people, and this difference also distinguishes modern and traditional people. Fatalism, like trustfulness, may be response to passed-down beliefs and to life experiences. Significantly, working class people do have less control over their lives, especially at work, and have a lower chance of realizing the American Dream of wealth and security. State lottery boards are aware of this cultural difference, so they locate lottery ticket sales outlets disproportionately in poorer neighborhoods. Ironically, this "sin tax" on the poor is often used to fund higher education programs that are disproportionately available to middle class children (such as in my state, Florida).

*Authoritarianism.* Following WWII, social scientists became interested in the psychological processes that would facilitate the adoption of fascist ideologies such as National Socialism (NAZI) in Germany. The well-known Authoritarian Personality construct came out of this theorizing, along with measures such as the original F (fascism) Scale and Altemeyer's more recent Right-Wing Authoritarianism scale. Authoritarianism includes extreme conservative political ideology, dominance of inferiors, submission to superiors, stereotyping other groups, cynicism, "projectivity" (seeing your own negative characteristics in others but not in yourself), valuing power and toughness, and rejection of "intraception" (humanistic, psychological soft-heartedness). One of the most consistent and troublesome findings in the thousands of studies of this construct has been the social class difference: working class people consistently score higher in authoritarianism. Authoritarianism is linked both to certain types of child-rearing practices (e.g., harshness) that are more common in working class families, and to other personality measures such as dogmatism and low cognitive complexity. Working class children become more authoritarian for several reasons, including child-rearing practices, attitudes and values passed down from their parents, and poorer cognitive environments. Class differences in authoritarianism run parallel to class differences in related concepts such as racial prejudice, anti-semitism, and homophobia.

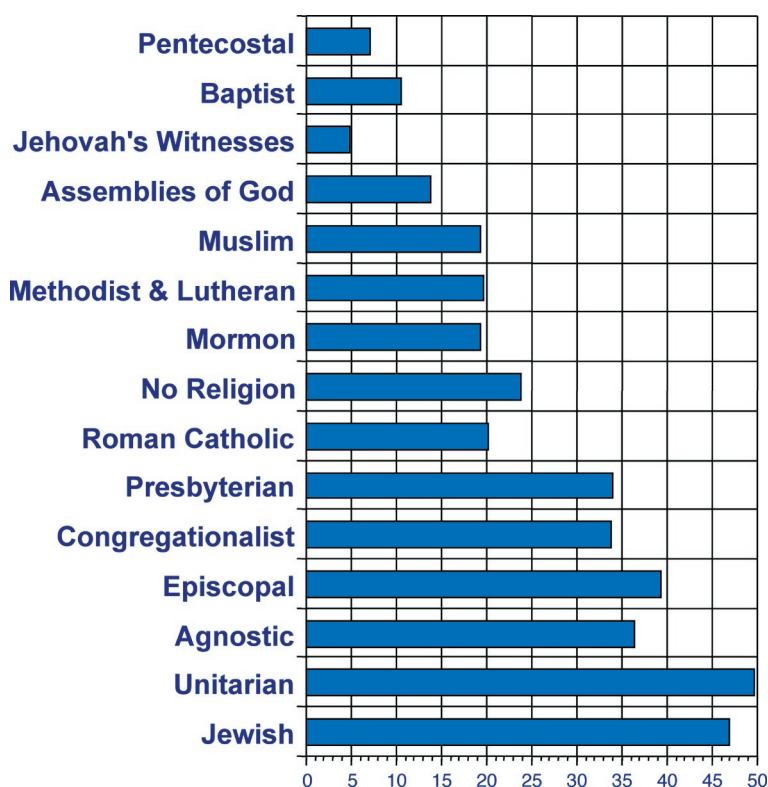
Two important questions remain: First, is authoritarianism more functional for working class people, that is, does it help them get along better in their life situations? and second, does authoritarianism (as well as other social values and beliefs) work against upward mobility? These are difficult questions that strike to the core of culturalist approaches to sociology and ethnicity. For example, the latter issue is closely related (at least in the heads of social scientists) to the famous Culture of Poverty and related theories: are underclass Blacks held back by cultural values, beliefs, and practices that are passed down across generations? It is also closely linked to the "difference vs. deficit" battle in the sociology of ethnicity and poverty: is authoritarianism a class/cultural difference that we should just accept in a cultural-relativist manner, or is it really a harmful deficit?

Unfortunately, there is still another level of complexity in this story which illustrates well why social science is so interesting but at the same time frustrating. Because the original Freudian theorizing about authoritarianism viewed it as a symptom of a psychological problem, these class differences suggest that we might think of an entire social category as “sick” (Hogan & Emler, 1978). And because authoritarianism is so closely tied to racial and religious prejudice, it has harmful consequences for society as a whole and can’t be dismissed simply as an interesting difference. But how can a whole social class, a huge proportion of any modern nation, be construed as “sick”? What kind of psychotherapy is needed here? Of course, there is a wrinkle in this logic: maybe judgments of who is OK and who is not OK are based on who has the power to formulate and promulgate these judgments and who does not. Maybe from a different perspective the middle class is the sick class. It’s you.

**Religion.** One of the primary agents of social control in societies is religion. Religions hold explicit and implicit values and beliefs that are treated as, well, God-given, and rules of conduct enforceable through worldly and eternal sanctions. Religions differ from each other on several dimensions, such as “tight” (doctrinally strict and behaviorally restrictive) versus “loose” (open-minded, flexible, and lenient), expressiveness (emotionality and energy level of worship style), conception of God (God of love; God of vengeance), and fundamentalism (adherence to founding texts in a literal vs. metaphorical manner). Some culturalists view religion as the defining characteristic of the world’s major civilizations (e.g., Samuel Huntington, 1996) and attempt to identify relationships between religious variables and other societal variables (e.g., the Russian Orthodox church and the Russian political system).

Membership in American organized religions is closely tied to social class and reinforces class differences in social beliefs and values. In a survey conducted in the early 1990s, it was found that nearly 50% of Unitarians and Jews have a college degree, but only about 11% of Baptists. The average income of Unitarians and Jews is nearly twice that of Baptists. As *Newsweek* magazine put it some years ago (paraphrase), “you can know a church’s way of conceptualizing the devil by looking at the cars in its parking lot.” What *Newsweek* was saying is that religions popular among working class people see the devil in a literal manner—a being that lives in hell and tempts us continually—while religions favored by middle class people see the devil in a metaphorical manner, as a symbolic representation of evil and antisocial tendencies in the human condition.

The relationship of social class to religion is not merely a social science curiosity.



**Religious Affiliation and Education.** Percent of members of religious organizations who have completed a 4-year college degree. Source: *One Nation Under God* study, 1993.



Given the syndrome of values and beliefs associated with social class, this relationship has had important implications for American politics since the late 1970s. Religions have lined up on opposite sides in the so-called “culture wars,” and these positions have interacted with party politics to produce the coalitions found today in the Democratic and Republican parties. From a social class perspective, these coalitions often produce odd bedfellows, bringing together groups of people who have intrinsically conflicting economic interests. Culture rules.

### **Sex and Gender**

Social class is in the bedroom, too. Elaine Hatfield (199x) has illustrated the enormous cultural variability in sexual practices and gender roles observed in current and historical societies. Social classes show less variability but nonetheless seem to differ parallel to the modern vs. traditional distinction discussed previously. Kinsey’s famous 1940s study found greater premarital sex among lower, working, and middle class respondents (his terms) than among upper class respondents. Although sexuality changed dramatically in the West since the 1940s, class differences in sexual activity persist. Middle class adolescents put off first intercourse longer than working class adolescents. One reason for this difference is the greater involvement of middle class children in academic activities, although in a more general sense middle class children enjoy a longer childhood with fewer pressures to take on adult roles until their early 20s. Research also shows that classes differ in the manner in which they have sexual relations.

Despite great technological advances, sex still causes pregnancy (this is where babies come from). White, middle class girls are more successful in avoiding both pregnancy and childbirth than working class and non-white girls. However, in all classes women are faced with unwanted pregnancies. One major battleground of the American culture wars is abortion rights. Survey data show that Americans are closely divided on this topic but favor the pro-choice position by a small margin. However, class differences are much larger. A 1988 Wall Street Journal/NBC poll found that almost 80% of adults with a post-graduate degree were pro-choice, but less than 50% of those with less than a high school diploma were pro-choice. In the same poll, a similar, strong relationship was found between income and abortion opinions.

We can explain this class difference in several ways.

The religious affiliation differences presented previously suggest that the positions of institutional religions are accepted by their members.

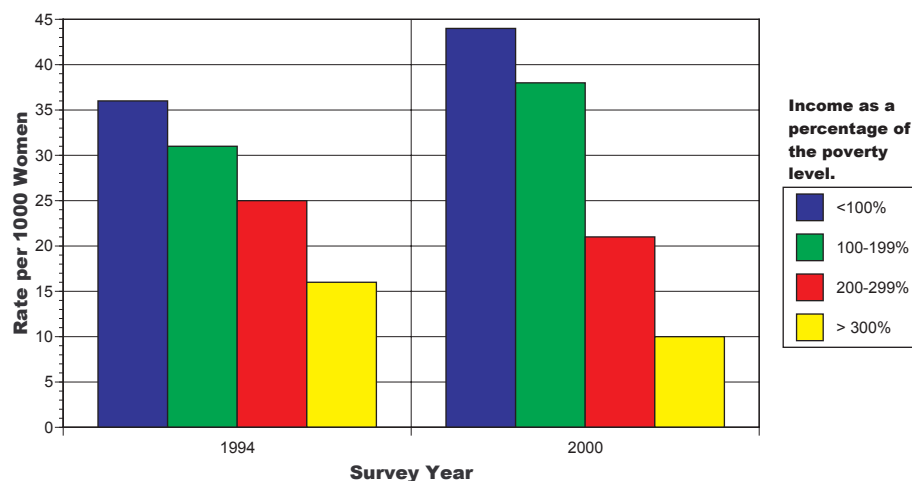
Middle class people are faster to accept new, highly non-traditional ideas, such as abortion and euthanasia.

Gender roles are more differentiated in the working class, hence the value of motherhood may be higher and value of female careers maybe lower.

Working class males (who generally don’t get pregnant) have more power.

The actual incidence of abortion also follows a class pattern. Whereas working class people are more likely to oppose abortion, they are also more likely to have abortions. The Alan Guttmacher Institute (2002) found that the rate of abortions

has dropped precipitously since 1994 but rose about 25% for poor women. Because these data were the number of abortions per 10,000 women (a common rate measure used by social scientists), not the rate per 10,000 pregnancies, they answer some questions but not others. The research was not able to determine if the increase was due to less use of contraceptives, greater sexual activity, greater acceptance of abortion, or poorer information about sex.



**Abortion Rates and Income.** Number of abortions per 1000 women in each group by income level. Income level is expressed relative to the poverty level (e.g., green bars are women who earn from the poverty level up to double the poverty level). Source: R. K. Jones et al., *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, 2002

## Physical Health

Modern societies such as the U.S. and the U.K. evidence the same pattern as societies throughout history in the relationship between social class and health: higher social class people are healthier and live longer. Adler et al. (1994) demonstrated that the function is fairly gradual and consistent: as class rises, health rises over the full range of social classes. In any given year, people are more likely to die as an inverse function of their social class, and research shows that this class effect increased from 1960 to 1984. Diagnosed heart disease decreases steadily with income, from 460/100,000 down to 330/100,000. Cervical cancer rates are about three times higher in the lowest classes compared to the highest classes. Why?

One explanation is that lower classes have poorer health-related habits. In the U.S., smoking rates are approximately double among people with a high school education or less compared to people with graduate degrees. Rates of obesity are higher in the lower classes, and physical activity is lower. Psychological characteristics can also explain physical health outcomes: people who are depressed, hostile, and under stress are less healthy. Research in the U.S. and Canada has shown that depression, hostility, and stress all vary inversely with social class.

## Mental Health

The relationship between depression and social class can be explained in two ways. First, the social selection or social drift model proposes that depressed people have more difficulty making a living, evidence lower social class (in the sense of income), and therefore the experience economic hardship associated with one of the proximal implications of being in a lower social class. The social cause model, in contrast, begins with social class, from which hardship results (in lower classes), that in turn causes psychological distress such as depression. Research supports the social cause model.

That economic hardship causes depression comes as no surprise. However, two cognitive processes mediate the relationship between social class and economic

hardship on the one hand, and psychological distress on the other (Mirowsky & Ross, 1989). Instrumentalism refers to a sense of personal control, self-efficacy, and personal agency in affecting one's life situations. Instrumentalism is stronger in the higher classes and acts to prevent or reduce depression. Cognitive flexibility involves the ability to take multiple perspectives in responding to situations, think complexly, be creative, and change. Faced with stressors, problems, or unforeseen circumstances, cognitively flexible people will respond and adapt more effectively, suffering less psychological distress.

## **Conclusion**

One of the considerable dangers in presenting such a wide description of class differences is that they will be taken as indications of relative worth. Viewed from the lens of middle class psychology, many of the characteristics of working class Americans are less functional, fulfilling, rational, healthy, modern, or conducive to prosperity than those of the middle class. The working class way of life can be viewed as troubled, with many deleterious aspects that are both a cause and a consequence of low socio-economic status. However, it is necessary to view the characteristics of all social classes in the context of how people live, day-to-day and generation-to-generation. First, psychological and behavioral characteristics that may appear dysfunctional from the point of view of one class may have adaptive qualities from a different point of view. Much of the child-rearing research, for example, demonstrates an adaptiveness to working class child-rearing practices that might not be apparent to the middle class observer. Second, some characteristics may be understood as the (possibly inevitable, possibly unfortunate) consequences of other qualities that are adaptive. Third, the life situations of one class may be a direct or indirect result of unfavorable power relationships with another class, so what the more powerful class sees as deficits of the less powerful class are in fact responses to exploitation by the more powerful class. This type of argument is often made to explain certain ways that poor people respond to poverty. It is important to understand that each social class lives in a symbiotic relationship with the others, power and privilege differentials notwithstanding. The relationships may vary over long time spans and the relative prosperity and power of the classes may wax and wane, but at a fundamental level these relationships are long-lasting: class is forever.

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