Social Class on Campus

Theories and Manifestations

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Acknowledgments

I HAVE BEEN INTERESTED in social class for quite a while, and my movement toward this book had several critical incidents and many helping hands. I remember sitting with a faculty colleague and six master's students in the food court in New Orleans during lunch at an annual meeting of the American Counseling Association. I like to present at conferences so I asked if anyone wanted to write a presentation proposal for the conference scheduled in Anaheim the following year. Four students, Heather Burrow, Colleen Kendrick, Julie Parrott, and Kristin Tippin, said yes and we met weekly for the next few months to develop the proposal and then met again to develop the presentation. The intellectual and emotional contributions of these women to my thinking have been deep and sustaining.

The next year I looked for copresenters for a state conference and was lucky enough to find Leslie Jowarski and Amy Welch to work with. Their insights, thoughts, and contributions to my understanding of class were critical. After that, each conference presentation brought new insights, and the audience participants were willing contributors to ever more complex ways of discussing social class. I am grateful to my copresenters, Dan Stoker, Carey Treager-Huber, and Mary Springer, and everyone in attendance at each of our presentations.

Diane Cooper sought me out at a conference and said bluntly, "You have to do something with this stuff." So I started this book. I kept presenting at conferences as a way to refine and deepen the dialogue about class on campus, and I kept listening to people. Along the path I had wonderful conversations with Ken Barr, Tracy Davis, Donna Talbot, Aimee Medina, Matt Draper, Janet Weirick, and many others.

Often these conversations were an excuse for me to think out loud while talking with smart, articulate, and interesting people.

Writing is difficult for me, and I am particularly grateful for the encouragement of Sarah Burrows and John von Knorring. I am ever grateful to Fran Hatton, who took the first look at the entire manuscript and said, "This is pretty good," and then she told me all the things to fix. Throughout the text I have added references to people who have turned the right phrase at the right time, who have helped with the stories, or who have directly helped, so look for their names.

To everyone known and unknown—thanks.

About the Author

Placing authors in context is important since we all approach material from our own point of view. I am a European American college professor born in 1950. My maternal line traces to the 1600s with English immigrants who settled in New England and a paternal line of English and German immigrants who came to the United States in the 1880s. While I identify with the geographical location of my mother's family I identify with the intellectual heritage of my father's family. My paternal grandfather, the English side, went to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, became an engineer and later a vice president of human resources. My paternal grandmother, the German side, went to a women's finishing school and was a stay-at-home mom. My father had a PhD from an Ivy League school, a Stanford postdoc; was a professor of biology at an Ivy League school; and was later dean of sciences at a California state college. My mother, the New England side, was one of the last generation born on Moosebrook Farm in Massachusetts, ending a line from before U.S. independence from England. My mother went to the University of New Hampshire, got a BS in biology, and became a stay-at-home mom. She was a first-generation college student, as were her brother and sister. I am third-generation college and second-generation PhD. My sister went to a Seven Sisters college, and I went to an ACM college. My oldest child and my sister's oldest went to an Ivy League and a Seven Sisters college respectively, and our second children both went to an ACM school. I have a PhD in student development in postsecondary education from a Big Ten school, my wife has a Big Ten PhD in linguistics and is a professor of linguistics, and my sister has a Big Ten PhD in developmental psychology and is

now dean of arts and sciences at a prestigious research university. Our first cousin is a physician, and we count him among the five Doctor Barratts in our lineage. This says a lot about my social class of origin and about my attributed social class. It provides some perspective on my view of social class on campus. My current felt social class is another matter.

About the questions in this book

I am at heart a classroom teacher and a discussion facilitator. A good discussion question leads to more, better, more articulate, and more interesting questions. For me good questions have complicated answers. When I was teaching at a selective state university in Ohio I would often answer student questions with, "It depends," and then go on to explore what the answer would depend on. Students, and most of us, are looking for answers. This book is filled with lots of questions and few answers.

I find it interesting that books on multicultural anything start by warning the reader not to stereotype, and then proceed to provide stereotypes for each minority group. Phrases like "African Americans are . . ." or "Hispanics are . . ." or "German immigrants are . . ." make me angry. If you are looking for a book that will tell you what upper-class people or students in poverty are like, what their values, norms, morality, and sexual activities are, this is not the book for you. If you are looking for a book that explores the underlying concept of class and helps you understand there are differences within class as well as between classes, then this is the book for you. This is not a book about diversity. This is a book about class. Diversity is about how we can all live and work together. Class is about what separates and divides us.

The questions in this book serve as rhetorical devices and as a way for you to explore what you think about class. The questions are a way for you to figure out what the answer depends on for you.

Yes, and . . .

There is more than one way to look at anything. The more tools we use to examine a concept, the more fully we understand the concept.

The best and most confusing way to knowledge is to simultaneously apply multiple and contradictory perspectives. Using a single explanation gives rise to the false assumption that there is only a single explanation. However, it is easy to fall into the trap of thinking that words are themselves the concept. If I point at the moon, is my finger the moon? If I explore the moon with a telescope, is it the moon in the reticule? If I land on the moon and bring back moon rocks, are those rocks the moon? "The map is not the territory; the word is not the thing," one of the precepts of general semantics, is usually attributed to Alfred Korzybski. This simple statement articulates the danger inherent in every explanation.

I took the idea of "Yes, and . . ." from Professor Jim Banning, to whom I am thankful. "Yes, and . . ." encapsulates an attitude of discourse, shunning the dismissive attitude behind "Yes, but . . ."

"Yes, and . . ." embodies the multifaceted reality of which we are all a part.

PART ONE

Understanding Social Class

CHAPTER 1

A Starting Point

Class is more than money

Saying that class is about money is the same as saying that ethnicity is about skin color. Money is part of class, and skin color is part of ethnicity. One sticky idea in this book, one sound bite, is this: Social class is more than rich and poor.

Most models of class are useful in some ways and inadequate in others. The trick is to figure out which model of social class works best for what you need to do. In some situations viewing class as money may be effective. Parental income is one way to group students and parents by class. In some situations viewing class as one's occupation may be effective. Parental occupation is one efficient way to group parents and students by class. In some situations viewing class as culture may be effective. Student interests and activities are important and reflect a culture-based worldview.

Class is personal

A second sound bite, a sticky idea that makes the perspective of this book different from that of many others, is this: Social class is personal.

Much of the literature on class comes from economics and sociology. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*

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(APA, 2009) notes, "Do not attribute human characteristics to animals or to inanimate sources" (p. 69). To attribute the actions of the creation of class or the act of sustaining class to an inanimate source like society or the economy is questionable. Universities don't do anything. People do things. Economies don't do anything. People do things. Societies don't do anything. People in societies do things. The idea of an economy acting in a certain way or a society acting in a certain way is an abstract fiction, albeit a useful one. The collection of individual actions must be seen for what they are, individual actions, not abstract ideas.

Class is an intercultural experience

Milton Bennett's (1998) model of intercultural sensitivity is a useful tool to deconstruct conversations about class. In Bennett's model people move from the lowest stage, called denial, to the defense stage to minimization to acceptance to adaption to the highest stage, called integration. While Bennett's model is about intercultural sensitivity, it applies to class quite well because one way to see class is as culture. Personal reactions to differences depend on many things, and Bennett's intercultural sensitivity model is one among many useful tools for self-examination when class comes up in conversation.

Denial. Someone in this stage might comment: "We really don't have class in the United States." People in the denial stage about class are unaware of the reality of class-based differences among people. These individuals are unaware of the important economic, cultural, and personal differences that relate to class.

Defense. Typical comments from someone in the defense stage might be: "They're poor because they don't work hard," and "Those rich snobs think they're better than the rest of us." People in the defense stage have a negative attitude about the classes above or below them. In this stage people like us (PLU) are normal, and any deviation from our personal PLU norms is seen as negative or abnormal.

Minimization. People in the minimization stage repeat the myth, "Well, we're all really middle class anyway," minimizing and belittling

real class differences and trying to make the middle class inclusive of everyone. They see all of us as having universal values rather than values derived from a classed context. Real differences are denied in this stage, and the appropriateness of alternative norms, behaviors, and so forth is not recognized. At this stage people wish that everyone were middle class so that we would all be normal. This leads to the assumption that everyone wants, or should want, to become middle class. Asking, "Why can't we all just get along?" is another way to minimize real class differences.

Myths about class are artifacts of denial, defense, and minimization. Individuals in Bennet's (1998) stages of acceptance, adaptation, and integration see class differences for what they are and work on understanding their own cultural assumptions.

Class is individual perception

How we see class is important. If we see class as being about money, then we will identify money problems within class and pursue money-related solutions to these problems. If we see class as external to the individual, our understanding of class, the problems we see, and the solutions we promote will reflect this idea that class is external to the individual. If we see class as internal to the individual, and this is the primary model of class used in this book, then the problems we see and the solutions we promote will reflect this individual view of class. If we see class from multiple perspectives, from a more complicated view, then our understanding of the problems of class will be richer, the problems we see will be more complete, and the solutions we promote will be more broad based. Class is money and wealth and cultural capital and prestige and educational attainment and many other things.

Social class is more than rich and poor.

Class as a tool

Which type of screwdriver do you prefer: a Phillips head or a slot head? Most people don't know much about screws and screwdrivers and have

no preference, and many people answer they prefer a Phillips head screwdriver. The right answer of course is that you prefer the screwdriver that matches the screw you need driven. We all have used the wrong tool on occasion. I recall removing a slot head screw with lobster claw pliers because the slot had been stripped out of the screw head. While I had wished the screw had a Phillips head because it is less likely to strip out a Phillips head screw, the screw head was not a Phillips head, and my wishing it so did not make it so. Using my power screwdriver, I have managed to strip out my share of Phillips head screws even when I use the right screwdriver. First, using the right tool for the job is important, and second, even with the right tool you can apply too much power or use it inappropriately. Models of social class are tools, and the tools we use should meet the needs we have.

A word about precision

What is simple is rarely true, and what is true is rarely simple. Aristotle, writing in Book 1, Chapter 3 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, has an interesting observation on precision:

> It is the mark of an educated man [*sic*]to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits; it is evidently equally foolish to accept probable reasoning from a mathematician and to demand from a rhetorician scientific proofs. (Aristotle, trans. 1976).

The level of precision is one way to distinguish various disciplines. The social sciences work with notable levels of imprecision. Standard errors of measurement are substantial in the typical quantitative measures employed in psychology, sociology, and education. Imprecision makes for complicated interpretations. Similarly, concepts like class are inherently imprecise. The idea of a photon is based on a physical object or event. Having a physical reality of some sort creates one level of precision. The idea of class is based on the observations of large groups of people and on the observations of people within groups, and this creates an entirely different level of precision. Unlike photons, there is

no physical object or event behind social class. Research on social class is fraught with the problem of precision.

Class as identity

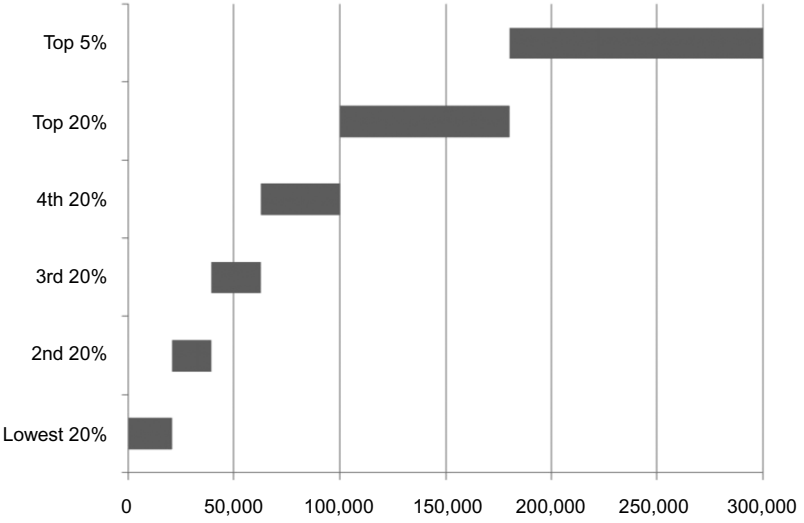
The contemporary United States of America has been called an identity society. We all develop a gender, ethnic, and class identity at an early age as we go through a process of identification and differentiation. Gender and ethnic identity do not change for most people, and in a society without class movement class identity does not change. However, we know that class movement, either up or down, is a fact of life for many in the United States. This dynamic class movement gives rise to the idea that we all have a social class of origin, a current felt social class, and an attributed social class, where we came from, what we think of ourselves, and what others think of us (Barratt, 2005). As first-generation students move up in social class because of their education, a mismatch between their class identities arises. It should not go without notice that this internal identity conflict can engender attendant psychological symptoms of anxiety and depression. This tripartite notion of class identity is the third sound bite, the third sticky idea in the book.

We all have a social class of origin, a current felt social class, and an attributed social class.

Class as income and wealth

The reality of class depends on how we describe class. The simplest answer is that class is about money, and money is income for most people. There are huge disparities in Americans' earnings, and income certainly is one way to keep score. Is a trucker who makes $80,000 a year in the upper-middle class? If we use groups of 20% of the population based on family income we get five evenly sized groups, and subdivide the top 20% to create an elite class with the 5% highest income.

FIGURE 1
Family Income (2008)



Note: Adapted from U.S. Census Bureau. (2008b). *Income: Households, Table H-1. Income Limits For Each Fifth and Top 5 Percent, All Races*.

Figure 1 of the income tables from the U.S. Census Bureau (2008b) shows income for these six groups in 2006 U.S. dollars.

Income is potential wealth, and wealth is accumulated economic assets. In the contemporary United States only a small percentage of the population has any wealth at all, and most of that is in home equity. Most people owe more money than they have. Mortgages, car loans, credit card debt, school loans are all balanced against home equity, savings, and retirement dollars. Class as wealth is useful when making a distinction among the wealthy, but most people have no liquid wealth like savings or investments.

Class as capital

While Marx (1885/1948) used economic capital as one analytic tool to examine class, other authors, like Bourdieu (1986) in "The Forms of

Capital," suggested that class should also include social and cultural capital. Social capital is an interpersonal network of people who can collaborate and join their resources. Put simply by professor and author Michael Cuyjet: "It's not who you know, it's who knows you."

Cultural capital is the knowledge and skills of the prestige class. College is an opportunity to build both. Other forms of capital, such as academic capital, may be used to examine the role of class on campus. Social and cultural capital takes time and skill to build. We all start to build capital at home, and coming from a wealthy home means being economically, socially, and culturally wealthy.

Class as education

August Hollingshead (1957, 1975) used educational attainment and occupational prestige to measure social status. Education is not evenly or randomly distributed in adults over 25 in the United States (see Figure 2) according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2008a).

We can use educational attainment to make five meaningful and unequal sized groups as shown in Figure 3.

Class as prestige

In U.S. American culture, prestige is an obvious marker indicating the best product, service, or educational institution. The word *prestige* is used in this book instead of *status* because prestige is a higher-prestige word than status. Higher-prestige colleges are considered better colleges. Higher-prestige varieties of English are considered better English. Higher-prestige clothing, purses, and accessories are considered better. Higher-prestige beer is considered better. When higher-prestige anything is put to a test, the product, service, or educational institution is often not better quality. A student in one of my classes, Aimee Medina, coined the phrase "obviously labeled fashion" to describe large logo designs seen on consumer products, and I added the phrase "subtly labeled fashion" to reflect smaller, more discreet, and consequently