

Social Class Justifications: The Capitalist Conspiracy?

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this research is to better understand the attitudes of University of Central Florida students concerning the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies related to social class inequality. This research measures gender, race, social class, and level of exposure to the lower class as key factors in students' beliefs. The data were collected through the use of self-administered surveys distributed to 1496 UCF students from a variety of different colleges on the Orlando campus. The most significant findings were in relation to the "work hard, get ahead" ideology, as well as the equal opportunity myth. This is a non-probability sample; however, the sample reflects the demographics of the current UCF population.

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INTRODUCTION

Capitalism creates social stratification whereby some members of society are very wealthy while others are extremely poor. In between are endless degrees of privilege that unite into what most of society refers to as the middle and working classes. Inequality exists within each class to the extent that prestige, education, lifestyle, rewards, and life-chances are unevenly distributed (Johnson, 2006). With excessive wealth on one end and extreme poverty on the other, justifications must be created to rationalize these inequalities (Johnson, 2006). These justifications provide answers to the disadvantaged who may begin to question the current system, especially when wealth gaps seem excessive and unfair (Huber & Form, 1973). Capitalists need to create the illusion of a fair economic social structure and justifications to fulfill this purpose. The result is the “legitimization of inequality” that functions to preserve social inequality by making it seem normal, fair, and even moral (Rothman, 2005). Stereotypes, myths, and ideologies—in short, justifications—become tools to make the poor, as well as the rich, believe that they deserve their place in the stratification spectrum; thus, system justifications are how inequality is perpetuated (Rothman, 2005).

Research in this area is important because the income gap between the top and bottom earners is growing (Klinger et al., 2002). Those who believe the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies used to justify the lower classes’ position in the economic social structure will do little to curtail this gap. For the poor, the income gap is a quality-of-life issue. They are plagued with insurmountable strain and stress that result in a life that has no comparison to the benchmark “American Dream.”

The purpose of this study is to address justifications; specifically, the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that are often used to characterize the lower class. Do members of the lower class believe that they have the same opportunities as everyone else in society? Do those with privilege believe more than those without privilege that the distribution of rewards is based mainly on individual hard work and effort? Do relationships with members of the lower class minimize these beliefs?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ideology

Marx’s theory of class conflict has been the traditional source of understanding the various ideologies associated with social class. Marx (1846/1970) predicted that modern capitalism would evolve into

a two-class structure with an owner class and worker class becoming increasingly hostile toward each other. The worker class would eventually become aware of its oppression (class consciousness), then overthrow the owner class in a revolution that would restructure society and establish a fair system (Marx, 1846/1970). This revolution has never ensued in the advanced capitalist societies and many researchers have wondered why.

Recent research on what has been termed the “system justification model” seeks to address this very question. Social psychologists argue that by way of continued focus on in-group and out-group conflict, System Justification Theory has long been ignored in favor of the conflict theories (Jost, Banaji, & Nosek, 2004). Their research on more than 20 hypotheses concludes that the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that are used to legitimize inequality are not only maintained by the dominant group through in-group favoritism, but are also accepted by subordinate groups through out-group favoritism (Jost et al., 2004). This research suggests that the disadvantaged believe the dominant group’s ideologies. Jackman’s (1996) research contends that the “ideology of individualism” explains why the subordinate group remains silent in the face of inequality by fostering the belief that equal opportunity exists for all classes.

Stereotypes and Myths

There is an abundance of studies related to racial stereotypes, myths, and ideologies, specifically as it pertains to African Americans. Studies show that Americans in general accept the “black, violent criminal” stereotype (Livingston & Nahimana, 2006; Barkan & Cohn, 2005). Findings indicate that belief in racial stereotypes by the white majority directly affect negative views on issues like affirmative action, welfare, and especially crime policy (Barkan & Cohn, 2005). Their research concludes that racial beliefs are the main factor in whites’ wanting more money to be spent on crime control (Barkan & Cohn, 2005).

Belief in racial stereotypes by the white majority is a concern but hardly the cause of persistent poverty. The research of Harvey and Reed (1996) acknowledges that studies of social class inequalities have generally been abandoned for the last 30 years in favor of race and gender studies. Commenting on the new “denial of class” ideas, they state that scholars are using generic arguments to “augment class-based explanations of poverty by adding

racial, ethnic, and gender considerations” (Harvey & Reed, 1996). By shifting focus away from the unequal class structure and attributing poverty to racial or ethnic differences, capitalists are able to deflect attention from the economic system itself as responsible for persistent inequalities.

Many researchers have studied the gender stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that surround the issue of social class. Many of these gendered class stereotypes involve welfare recipients. Enacted in the 1930s to support deserted and widowed mothers during and after the Great Depression, welfare has evolved, or so it is frequently maintained, into a system that promotes dependency and thus fosters lazy and irresponsible behavior (Harris & Parisi, 2005). This study argues that even lawmakers attribute poverty to the growing number of welfare mothers, shifting focus from structural factors like lack of jobs, low wages, and affordable child care (Harris & Parisi, 2005). The conundrum is, when women are part of the workforce, conservative gender ideologies are pervasive and society blames America’s problems on mothers being absent from the home (Stewart, 2003).

Stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that work to legitimize a system of class inequality are even recognizable at an early age. Woods, Kurtz-Costes, and Rowley’s (2005) study shows that some stereotypes about the disadvantaged are embraced by adolescence. Differences in age, race, and socioeconomic class help shape children’s beliefs about the rich and the poor (Woods et al., 2005). Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are more acutely aware of the problems that face the poor, whereas the affluent believe the stereotypes that popular media convey (Woods et al., 2005). Children’s recognition of the differences between the poor and affluent directly supports the conflict theory.

The myth of equal opportunity is challenged by Jennifer Hochschild (2003) who has researched social class in public schools and concludes that now, more than in the past 30 years, schools are segregated by social class. The schools composed of poor children are under-funded and suffer from problems related to poverty such as poor health, family instability, dangerous communities, less educated parents, and anxiety about discrimination (Hochschild, 2003). It is unclear whether the segregation of the poor from middle and upper class children cause stereotypes, myths, and ideologies to be reinforced through lack of association or through some other mechanism, but class segregation and the consequent

lack of interaction between classes is certainly a possible source of stereotyping that deserves further research.

Similar studies have been conducted on college campuses. One study in particular conducted by Abowitz (2005) tests college students’ beliefs in meritocracy and the justification of inequality. Her findings indicate that college students believe in the achievement ideology: individual effort as the predictor of future success. Students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (and males) also tended to believe that social inequality is justified. However, Abowitz (2005) acknowledges that her sample was drawn from an elite liberal arts institution and may not be representative of most college students.

The prevailing ideology is that equal opportunity exists for those who work hard; moreover, research shows that this view is pervasive in America. Some research posits that the lower class believes this ideology as much as the middle and upper classes believe it (Jost et al., 2004). Conflicting research argues that the lower class may be more aware than the affluent that opportunity is biased based on social class (Woods et al., 2005). The shift from social class explanations of poverty to race and gender explanations in the past 30 years has left a gap in research (Harvey, Reed 1996). This study attempts to address the question: Do members of all social classes believe the ideology of individualism or do members of the lower class recognize that they are at a disadvantage? This research addresses individuals’ social class and to what extent they believe in the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that legitimize class inequality. It also attempts to measure exposure to the lower class to see if relationships with members of the lower class minimize these beliefs.

HYPOTHESES

Based on the studies just reviewed, the hypotheses are as follows:

- 1) There is a positive relationship between social class standing and the belief that the distribution of rewards in society is fair and based mainly on effort. In other words, those who have benefited most from “the system” will be the most likely to consider the system fair and based on merit.
- 2) As the more privileged gender, males will believe more than females that the distribution of rewards in society is fair and based mainly on effort.

3) Whites will believe more than those in minority groups that the distribution of rewards in society is fair and based mainly on effort.

4) Middle and upper class students will have stronger beliefs in the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that legitimize class inequality.

5) Students who have had more exposure to the lower class will believe less strongly in the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that legitimize class inequality

DATA

Research data was generated through the use of self-administered surveys. 1496 surveys were administered to students in many different departments on the University of Central Florida Orlando campus, including Arts, Humanities, Business, Law, Engineering, Education, Social Sciences, and Psychology. During a two-week period, 40 students administered surveys by contacting professors in advance and distributing at the beginning or end of class time. During distribution of the survey, if a student chose not to participate, that survey was re-distributed to another student.

After entering the data into SPSS and combining the results, 1496 surveys were available for analysis. Even though this is a non-probability sample, demographics from the 2006 UCF student body are comparable to those in our study: 45% male and 55% female, 70% white, 8% black, 12% Hispanic, and 10% other.

MEASURES

Independent Variables

One independent variable for this study is exposure to the lower class. The definition of exposure is any contact with the lower class through identification with the group, personal relationships, or diversity education. To measure this variable, respondents were asked what they estimate their parents' average yearly income to be with 4 categories to choose from: under \$30,000; between \$30,000 and \$50,000; between \$50,000 and \$75,000; and more than \$75,000.

In addition, five questions were asked to gauge respondents' exposure to the lower class:

- Growing up, I was a member of the lower class.
- I have a family member or close friend who is a member of the lower class.
- I have volunteered with people from the lower class.

- I have taken courses on social class differences.
- I have had little or no interaction with people from the lower class.

A second independent variable explores respondents' access to opportunity. Access to opportunity can be defined as the privilege that exists simply from being a member of a group, not from hard work or effort (Johnson, 2006). Examples of privilege include being white, male, and of the middle or upper classes. Rewards like better educations, promotions, status and prestige are unevenly distributed to members of these groups. To measure this variable, social class, race and gender were used. Social class was gauged through parents' average yearly income. For race, the question asked, "What race do you consider yourself?" Respondents could choose among the following answer choices: White/Caucasian, Black/African American, Asian, and other with an open-ended "write-in" area. An additional question to gauge Latino origin was provided. It asked, "Do you consider yourself Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish?" Respondents could answer yes or no. To measure gender, the question asked, "What is your gender?"

Dependent Variables

Two dependent variables were measured in this project. The first dependent variable is the belief in stereotypes, myths, and ideologies that legitimize class inequality. A Lickert-type scale was used to gauge intensity of respondents' attitudes (Babbie, 2005). Respondents were asked to check a box within a scale of strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, and strongly agree, for the following statements:

- Members of the lower class lack motivation.
- Members of the lower class are uneducated.
- Members of the lower class are poor because of drugs or alcohol.
- Members of the lower class are mostly minorities.
- Members of the lower class have the same opportunities as everyone else.

The second dependent variable is belief in the ideology of individualism; i.e., individual talent or hard work as the predictor of future economic success. To measure this belief, respondents were asked: "Of the following choices listed, which do you feel is the biggest predictor of future economic success (please choose only one)?" The response categories are: individual talent or hard work, social class position, family background, and who you know.

DATA ANALYSIS STRATEGY

To test the hypotheses, a variety of statistical analyses were used, including cross-tabulations and multivariate logistic regression analysis. For the independent variables of gender, race, and social class (which are indicators for privilege), cross-tabulations were run individually against belief in the ideology of individualism: individual talent or hard work as a predictor of future economic success. This cross-tabulation tests hypotheses 1, 2, and 3.

Another analysis that tests hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 is a multivariate test. The dependent variable, measuring the belief in the ideology of individualism, was recoded into 2 dummy categories; one category that includes only individual talent or hard work and the other category that combines family background, who you know, and social class. These data were run with the independent variable gender, controlling for race and social class in the analysis.

To test hypotheses 4, 5, and 6, which look at exposure to the lower class and the belief in stereotypes, myths, and ideologies associated with the lower class, a cross-tabulation was run on each individual response to exposure. For instance, if the respondent checked that she/he were a member of the lower class (highly exposed), a cross-tabulation was conducted with each stereotype, myth, and ideology separately to gauge if the respondent were more or less likely to embrace stereotypical beliefs.

RESULTS

Close to 60 percent of this study were female and 71 percent were white. Close to 66 percent responded that their parents' annual income was more than \$50,000. Most of the respondents in this study had either a close relationship with members of the lower class, volunteered with the poor, or took courses on social class differences. Exposure to the lower class was hard to test because of these factors. Most respondents answered disagree to the stereotypes measured. Considering how "politically correct" American society has become, it is not surprising that respondents answered disagree to stereotyped questions.

For hypothesis number 1, concerning the relationship between being middle or upper class and the belief that the distribution of rewards in society is fair and based mainly on effort, a cross-tabulation was conducted. More than half of the respondents in every income bracket said that success depends on individual talent or hard work. The next highest response category was "who you know"

with a range of 17%- 22%. A chi-square test showed that the relationship between income and these beliefs was not statistically significant.

Hypothesis 2 concerns the relationship between being male and the belief that the distribution of rewards in society is fair and based mainly on effort. The appropriate cross-tabulation, however, showed that women were significantly more likely to believe that individual talent or hard work were the biggest predictors of economic success, so, hypothesis 2 is also unsupported. A similar crosstabulation with race showed no significant difference in beliefs of whites and non-whites, contrary to hypothesis 3.

In addition to the bivariate analyses just reported, a multivariate logistic regression was also conducted. Controlling for race and income, males are 17% less likely to believe that the biggest predictor of future economic success is individual talent and hard work, but this difference was not statistically significant. Whites are 1.13 times more likely than minorities to believe in the ideology of individualism, but this difference is also not significant; likewise the difference associated with income. Thus, contrary to prediction, belief in the ideology of individualism is widespread throughout all gender, race, and social class categories.

Hypothesis 4—the relationship between exposure to the lower class and equality beliefs—tended to fare better. More than a third of those who answered yes to the statement "Growing up, I was a member of the lower class" strongly disagreed that the lower class has the same opportunities as everyone else, compared to only 16% of those who answered no. This difference is significant at the .001 level and supports hypothesis 4. Respondents with little or no interaction with members of the lower class agreed with the myth that minorities make up the bulk of the lower class. This was significant at the .001 level and supports hypothesis 4.

However, no other significant relationships were found between level of exposure to the lower class and stronger beliefs in the stereotypes, myths, and ideologies.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

Overwhelmingly, all social classes, genders, and races in this study believe the individual achievement ideology; i.e., individual talent and hard work are the key predictors of future economic success. This tends to support the System Justification Theory (SJT) which suggests the

ideology of individualism is shared by the disadvantaged and privileged alike. Based on these findings, privilege has little to do with beliefs in the ideology of individualism. These findings are in line with two studies presented in the literature review that deal with system justifications.

While respondents believe it is their own hard work that is the predictor of their success, most respondents understood that the lower class is disadvantaged in our society. The most significant finding in this study was the group that identified themselves as being members of the lower class. Prior SJT research posits that this group would be the least likely to recognize their disadvantaged position, and, even more, they would support the system the most. A significant percentage of this group strongly disagreed with the statement that the lower class has the same opportunity as everyone else. This finding does not support the System Justification Theory.

This research thus poses a dilemma. While the SJT is supported when the ideology of individualism is tested, it is not supported when dealing with the equal opportunity myth. Those who identify as being members of the lower class believe that individual talent and hard work is the biggest predictor of future economic success but at the same time strongly disagree that they have the same opportunities as everyone else. It may be that they have an accurate impression that the lower class has less opportunity, but, if given the chance, they have to work harder or be more talented than everyone else.

In the literature review, a comparison can be made with the research from the private liberal arts college that found students supporting meritocracy. Private liberal arts schools tend to be higher in socioeconomic status compared to a state school such as UCF. By believing in meritocracy or the ideology of individualism, those who are more privileged (in this case, students) justify their place in the stratification spectrum. Even those who identify as members of the lower class can strongly disagree with the equal opportunity myth but seek to justify their current college success as individual hard work or talent even when they are the exception to the rule.

A limitation of this research is that college students are very different from the US population. They are in a sense privileged for having the opportunity to attend college. Even college students who say they are members of the lower class are more privileged since they are the exception to the aggregate rule. In addition to being thus

privileged, college students typically encounter classes that expose them to liberal views on inequality, especially structural factors for failure. Future research on beliefs in ideologies should look at a more socio-economically heterogeneous group. If more disadvantaged groups reject personal explanations for failure and recognize structural dysfunction within the economic structure, then the question is raised: Why do they continue to remain silent?

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APPENDIX – TABLE AND FIGURES

Table 1: Frequencies Of All Variables

	Frequency	Percent
Gender – female	921	61.6
Race – white	1071	71.6
Parent's annual income		
< 30,000	156	10.4
30K - 50K	278	19.4
50K - 75K	344	23.0
> 75,000	652	43.6
Biggest Predictor of future economic success		
Hard work	861	57.6
Family	100	6.7
Social class	203	13.6
Who you know	305	20.4

Table 2: predictor of economic success by socioeconomic class

	Socioeconomic			
	< 30,000	30k-50k	50k-75k	>75k
Ind. talent & hard work	55.2%	59.2%	62.5%	58.2%
Social class	17.5%	14.8%	12.9%	12.7%
Family background	6.5%	4.3%	6.8%	7.3%
Who you know	20.8%	21.7%	17.8%	21.8%
Total	100%	100%	100%	100%

Table 3: predictor of economic success by gender

	Gender	
	Male	Female
Ind. talent & hard work	55.8%	60.2% **
Social class	16.9%	11.8%
Family background	5.9%	7.4%
Who you know	21.4%	20.4%
Total	100%	100%

** = p<.01

Table 4: Predictor Of Economic Success By Race

	Race	
	White	Other
Ind. talent & hard work	59.5%	56.7%
Social class	13.0%	15.5%
Family background	7.3%	5.9%
Who you know	20.0%	21.9%
Total	100%	100%

Table 5: Logistic Regression

Individual talent or hard work as biggest predictor of future economic success	
Gender	.844 (-.170) **
(Male=1)	
Race	1.13 (.123)
(White=1)	
Parents annual income	1.01 (.006)
-2 log likelihood	1869.49
Constant	1.39 (.330)
N=	1385
** = p<.01 (coefficient in parenthesis)	

Table 6: Crosstab – Respondents who identified as being a member of the lower class and their agreement with the statement: members of the lower class have the same opportunities as everyone else.

	Yes	No
Strongly disagree	34.6% **	15.6%
Disagree	26.1%	35.5%
Neutral	18.6%	22.6%
Agree	12.1%	19.9%
Strongly agree	8.6%	6.4%

** = p<.01

Table 7: Crosstab – Respondents who have had little or no interaction with members of the lower class and their agreement with the statement: members of the lower class are mostly minorities.

Little or no interaction with lower class	
Disagree	33.1%
Neutral	24.9%
Agree	42.2% **
** = p<.01	