

PAUSE to PONDER

How has social class mattered
in your educational experiences?

Social Class at Work

The workplace is a crucial site of class production and reproduction where classism occurs in numerous ways. Most organizations reflect and reinforce society's class system. Class-related power dynamics operate through structures, practices, policies, and norms. "Those in control of linguistic and communicative resources use these to manage the impressions of others."⁹⁶

Organizational hierarchies are inherently class based. Usually, the higher one's position in a hierarchy, the greater one's status and access to resources, including compensation, benefits, leave policies, travel funds, stock options, etc. Organizations exercise varying degrees and types of control of employees depending on their place in the organizational chart. Some institutions are more explicit about distinctions between levels of the organization than others. For instance, the federal government designates occupations according to a grade system that divides civil servant employees into eighteen ascending categories.

Physical aspects of the workplace also signify class distinctions and forms of control. The higher one is in the hierarchy, the more space one usually gets, and vice versa. Within office buildings, space and objects communicate class levels. Executives occupy larger, private offices furnished with more expensive or status-loaded artifacts. Consider, for instance, the symbolism of the corner office or the key to the executive washroom. Other examples are parking privileges, dining facilities, and office furniture. Can you think of other signs of social class?

Lower-level personnel have less privacy and limited control over their work space, if they even have a work space. Higher-level employees are more likely to have windows and doors, individual light switches, and a thermostat. Employees sometimes resist or disrupt control mechanisms by altering their spaces or creating new ones.

Class biases operate in many routine practices in organizations. Lower-level or lower status workers usually must account for when and how they expend their time. Higher-level or higher status employees may be less accountable. When I was a professor, I could come and go freely on campus. I didn't have to fill out a time sheet or punch a time card. I didn't have to take timed breaks. If I was sick, I could cancel class without consulting anyone, and my pay would not be affected. Most staff who are not faculty (except for higher level administrators) have to call their supervisor by a specific time to be paid for sick leave. They also might have to provide proof of illness.

Other practices that imply class bias include requiring employees to pay for items needed for doing the job (e.g., uniforms or tools) or expecting them to pay business expenses (e.g., for travel) in advance and be reimbursed later. Formal and informal dress codes also signify class. The style of dress often signals a person's organizational status. Distinctions like "white collar" (more formal: clothes are likely to retain a clean, pressed appearance) and "blue collar" (less formal: clothes might become soiled on the job) illustrate class distinctions connected to role. White collar jobs require higher education. White collar workers usually are paid a salary rather than per hour. Newer labels of collar colors are more symbolic than descriptive of apparel. For instance, "gold collar" employees are sought-after professionals with elite skill sets (e.g., surgeons, engineers, attorneys). "Green collar" workers are employed in environmental sectors.

Language related to collar color and crime embeds classist attitudes and assumptions. How do you distinguish "white collar" crimes from "blue collar" crimes? What social class do you associate with each one? One study found stark differences in public opinions and media coverage of white-collar versus blue-collar crimes—and disparities in the punishment of those crimes.⁹⁷ Many organizations require employees to wear uniforms, which can reveal and conceal statuses, certify legitimacy, establish conformity, or suppress individuality.⁹⁸ Uniforms "vary in legitimacy and prestige, conferring different degrees of honor on members."⁹⁹

Think for a moment about different uniforms, and what they signify. Among working-class employees (e.g., hotel maids or restaurant servers), a uniform signals a person's role to customers, clients, and patrons. For members of the working class, a uniform forces conformity and constrains individuality of dress among an occupational group. It also highlights the wearer's status and differentiates the wearer from other people in an organizational setting.

Military uniforms may evoke different responses than working-class uniforms. In addition, "the very existence of a uniform implies a group structure."¹⁰⁰ For example, uniforms clearly signify the hierarchy of armed services personnel. When I was in high school, I kind of envied the girls who went to Catholic school because their uniforms looked "cool." My envy probably was related to the positive image of those private schools.

Some staff members in lower level jobs perform their work backstage and/or after-hours, which renders them invisible. Even when they are visible, others in the workplace may tend not to acknowledge them. Some of these employees don't mind being backstage. They value their autonomy and independence. They appreciate avoiding degrading interactions with employees who may disrespect them.¹⁰¹

Communication scholar Wilfredo Alvarez conducted path-breaking research about Latin American immigrant janitors' cocultural communication experiences at a historically White university. A Latin American immigrant himself, Alvarez provides intriguing insights into these workers' lived

experiences. Alvarez found that they believe their “race-ethnicity, social class, immigration status, and occupation strongly shape customers’, same-race peers’, and supervisors’ communication orientations toward them.” One participant shared, “*Yo no creo que es porque yo soy Latino nada mas; es otras cosas tambien.* [I don’t think it’s only because I am Latina; it’s other things as well.]” As examples, she refers to her clothing as social status and being Salvadoran. Alvarez concludes, “Janitors’ perceptions of their social class, immigration status, and occupation as being connected to each other suggest that those identities work in tandem to produce complex meanings about who the janitors are.”¹⁰²

Social class matters during formal personnel processes. For example, employee recruitment processes often occur through social networks based on class similarities. In some organizations, hiring criteria favor seeking applicants from Ivy League or private college graduates. Interview expectations for certain jobs value dominant language codes and speech styles. These are based on how well someone speaks and understands standard, middle-class English.

Research shows that people quickly assume someone’s social class by listening to them speak. One study reported that this type of assumption affected seasoned interviewers’ opinions of job candidates. They judged individuals who spoke “lower class” speech to be less competent.¹⁰³ Can you think of examples of “lower class” speech?

One study found that interviewers for elite jobs in banking and law use markers of culture associated with social class to screen candidates. Examples include an interest in sailing or classical music.¹⁰⁴ In another research project, interviewers rated higher-class female candidates as less committed to working and more likely than other candidates to leave employment after having children—regardless of the female candidates’ current parental status. Members of a dental school admissions committee told me they favored applicants whose parent(s) were dentists, even though this was not one of the school’s qualifications. When we discussed this, they conceded that having a parent in the profession was not a predictor of a dental student’s success.

Individuals whose social class changes are known as “social class transitioners.” As they experience different social class statuses, they may gain invaluable insights and abilities. They might “connect with others on shared experiences to reduce conflict, increase cultural sensitivity, and promote inclusion.”¹⁰⁵

I was born into a working class family, and I moved into the middle class as an adult. I was a first-generation college graduate who once patched together a living by teaching part-time at three higher ed institutions simultaneously. Once I got a full-time position and as I moved into higher roles, I often drew upon my previous experiences. When I was a faculty member, I remembered struggling to pay for textbooks as a student. So, I compared prices for textbooks before adopting and requiring them for my classes.