

# Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice

## Monthly faculty development seminar at CSBSJU

### Session 2: Class, Classism and Cross-Class Communication

Thursday, October 24, 2019

Like all of our TDSJ seminars, this session will be structured as a parallel process: You will participate as “students” in a set of facilitated learning activities, and then step back to reflect on how you might use similar activities, content and teaching tools in your own classes.

To help us use our time well, we offer some “homework” to help you prepare for the session. Although it *will* be possible to participate without having done any of the homework, doing it will help us engage in deeper learning together.

In this case, we anticipate the homework will take most people 60-90 minutes total, depending on how deeply you decide to engage with it. We know your schedules are busy; if you are not able to do all the homework, doing some of it is nevertheless much better than none!

Suggestions for prioritizing homework:

- The attached handout is the piece we will use most directly during the session.
- The TDSJ chapter may be most helpful for thinking about your teaching.
- The other pieces listed below are for building your own background knowledge and/or as resources to assign for students.
- Since you come from many different disciplines and will have different levels of familiarity with the material, feel free to prioritize the pieces that are most new for you or that you think will be most helpful for your learning process.

**Read:**

- Class & Class Cultures handout (attached)
- “Classism” chapter in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, pp. XXX

**Watch:**

- Economic Inequality in America: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QPKKQnijnsM&t=319s> (3-min video)

**Listen:**

- NYT’s podcast “1619,” episode 3: The economy that slavery built. (~30 min. audio only) This is the most concise and compelling account I have heard about the interlacing between racism and classism in US History. [https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/1619/episode-2-the-economy-that-8KCOvnwjm\\_4/](https://www.listennotes.com/podcasts/1619/episode-2-the-economy-that-8KCOvnwjm_4/)

**Explore:**

- “Spent” is a budget simulation game to help students who have never been financially independent experience the challenge of balancing a household budget on a low-wage job <http://playspent.org/html/>

## What is Class?

Class can be defined as **relative social rank** in terms of **income, wealth, status, and power**.

A class group is a group of people who share **similar roles in the economic system** as particular kinds of workers, owners, traders and consumers.

Class also includes the **culture, knowledge, skills, and networks** that come along with being part of a particular class group.

In the U.S., and many other places, class is closely intertwined with other forms of hierarchy, especially race and gender. In fact, the U.S. economic system is so deeply based on racial stratification that race could be thought of as an aspect of class, and class as an aspect of race. The same could be said of gender, especially before the 1980s or so and continuing in some ways through the present.

Class is a hierarchy, and at the same time it is not only hierarchical. Some people simply have more financial wealth than others, but people don't have "more" culture, knowledge and skills than others; they have different cultures and different knowledge and skills.

Class culture maybe the least hierarchical and least straightforward aspect of class. Relationships across class are cross-cultural relationships, but since most of us haven't been taught to think about class culture, we may be unaware of cultural differences that come up.

*Classism* is the system of policies, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs that disempower working class and poor people while privileging wealthy people. It includes not only structures that perpetuate material inequality, but also norms and discourses that justify inequality. Like all other forms of oppression, classism can be acted out at a variety of levels (interpersonal, institutional, societal) and can be internalized.

## Class categories and class indicators

Adapted from categories from Betsy Leondar-Wright's research documented in *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movement Groups by Seeing Class Cultures*. Used by permission of Class Action, [www.classaction.org](http://www.classaction.org).

**Working class:** High school degree and maybe vocational education or 2-year degree; supervised wage jobs or hands-on small business; renting or modest homeownership.  
Subcategory: Lower-middle-class (buffer class).

**Persistent poverty:** Less than high school education; outside mainstream labor market, relying on public assistance; low-income so unmet basic needs; public or substandard housing or homeless.

**Professional-middle class:** 4-year college degree or more; professional/managerial jobs with relatively more autonomy and often higher income and security; homeownership with possibility to trade up to bigger/more desirable homes.  
Subcategories: Lower-professionals (buffer class); upper-middle-class.

**Straddler:** Upwardly mobile from working-class or poor childhood, first generation college degree; professional career (assimilated straddler) or not (unassimilated straddler)

**Voluntarily downwardly mobile:** From professional-middle-class or upper-middle-class background, college degree, choices to not pursue professional career for political, artistic or environmental values.

**Involuntarily downwardly mobile:** From professional-middle-class or upper-middle-class background, impacted by health crises and disabilities, addictions, crashed economy, war or other traumas, so in poverty or working class as an adult.

**Owning class:** Enough assets owned personally or accessible through family so that paid work is unnecessary (whether or not one chooses to work anyway)

**Mixed class:** Many people have complicated stories that don't fit into these categories, such as being raised by parents with different class categories from each other, or experiencing changes in class during childhood.

*To consider: Which class category most closely describes your situation? If mixed, how?*

# Class Culture

Class culture can be defined simply as **cultural elements shared by members of a class group** or subgroup. Another way to think of class culture is as those aspects of a culture that help a group respond to the questions:

- “How do we survive and/or thrive in this economic system?”
- “How do we make sense of our role in this economic system?”

In general, culture refers to a **shared way of life** – a set of **values, beliefs, norms and practices** shared by a group of people. More specifically, class cultures include things like

- Norms about what behavior is normal, acceptable, and appropriate in different situations
- Norms around communication style
- Norms about community structure, leadership and decision making
- Patterns of consumption
- Food practices
- Life-course expectations – what is normal and expected for group members to do at a particular age, e.g. when/whether people typically start working, get married, leave the town they grew up in, etc.
- Norms around family relationships – frequency of visits, financial relationships among generations, etc.
- “Common knowledge” about the value of work, goods, and people
- Stories that are told, believed, and acted upon about the economic system, people’s roles in it, and relationships among people/communities who have different roles in it
- Assumptions about meritocracy
- Tendency to be future-focused, present-focused, and/or past-focused
- Assumptions about class mobility
- Relationships to work – e.g. why we work; relationship between paid work and other aspects of life
- Valuing practicality and/or valuing aesthetics; specific aesthetic practices and preferences
- Emotional relationship to the economic system – e.g. respect, trust, fear, scorn, indifference, confusion...
- Focus on the individual, the family unit and/or the community
- Assumptions about resource sharing – how, who, how much, e.g. charity, government aid, hand-me-downs, trades, pro bono work ...
- Assumptions about geographic mobility

Cultures are not static, but they’re often fairly stable. In other words, they do change, but usually not quickly.

Culture is passed on from generation to generation. Because we learn it as children, culture tends to be pretty “sticky.” Even when our financial situation (income, wealth, occupation) may change, our class culture – the values, beliefs, norms and practices that feel “normal” to us – may not, or may change much more slowly. For that reason, describing an individual’s class sometimes requires describing not only their current situation, but also the situation they grew up in.

## Some Characteristics of Class Cultures

... which we understand to be necessarily overgeneralized, and recommend to be used as a starting point for discussion, *not* as a field guide.

	Owning Classes	Professional / Managerial Middle Classes	Working Classes (sometimes including "lower-middle" classes)	Low Income / Poor Classes
<b>Summary of class position</b>	Access to significant capital, some level of income from wealth, significant status/prestige & often political power	Some financial stability, dependent on income from a job, some autonomy in work, some status/prestige	Dependent on job for income, less autonomy in work, relatively lower status/prestige	Little if any income, income may be from public benefits or from work that is inconsistent and/or criminalized
<b>Relationship to work</b>	Steady work is optional.	Steady work is inevitable and necessary, and usually available.	Steady work is inevitable and necessary, although not always available.	Steady work is impossible and/or not expected.
<b>Cultural themes</b>	<p>Entitled, dreamers, free to be unconventional</p> <p>Unrooted, free to hop around geographically and metaphorically</p> <p>Future-oriented and sometimes past-oriented in some ways (e.g. re family legacy)</p> <p>Concerned with status, individualistic</p> <p>Tend to speak abstractly</p>	<p>Steadily employed, more conventional and pragmatic</p> <p>Unrooted, competitive steady workers, will move for career</p> <p>Achievement-oriented, future-oriented, life as transformative</p> <p>Concerned with status, individualistic</p> <p>Tend to speak abstractly</p>	<p>Steadily employed, more conventional and pragmatic</p> <p>Rooted, pragmatic steady workers, less likely to move for a job (except in mass migrations)</p> <p>Character-oriented, present-oriented, life as a tangled web of relationships</p> <p>Often anti-status, solidaristic</p> <p>Tend to speak in concrete examples</p>	<p>Constrained, discouraged, but less conventional</p> <p>Rooted in place and community, or unrooted by trauma</p> <p>Usually present-oriented, life as a tangled web of relationships</p> <p>Often anti-status, solidaristic</p> <p>Tend to speak in concrete examples</p>

Adapted from content from Betsy Leondar-Wright (2005), *Class Matters: Cross Class Alliance Building for Middle Class Activists*, Betsy Leondar-Wright (2012). *Missing Class: Strengthening Social Movements by Seeing Class Cultures*, and Barbara Jensen (2012) *Reading Classes: On Culture and Classism in America*.

## Functions of Class Cultures

One way to think about class cultures is in terms of how they interact with the economic system. Classed culture happens in response to, in resistance to, and in collusion with capitalism – all at the same time.

This chart summarizes some functions of class culture, in terms of the questions that class cultures seek to answer about a class group’s role in capitalism.

These summaries are necessarily overgeneralized, and only to be used as a starting point for discussion, *not* as a field guide.

Owning Classes	Professional / Managerial Middle Classes	Working Classes (including “lower-middle” or “buffer” classes)	Low Income / Poor Classes
The system serves us.	The system serves us in some ways, but our position is precarious.	The system serves us in some limited ways, and in other ways is hostile to us.	The system is hostile to us, and will likely never work in our favor.
How do we maintain and build the system as it currently is?	How do we support the status quo in order to maintain our current situation and avoid losing money/status/power?	How do we survive in this system, use it for what it’s useful for, and try not to get harmed by it?	How do we survive in spite of the system that targets us for harm?
How do we feel okay about and make sense of the position we have in this system?	How do we feel okay about and make sense of the position we have in this system?	How do we feel okay about and make sense of the position we have in this system?	How do we feel okay about and make sense of the position we have in this system?

**To consider: How do aspects of the class culture(s) you were raised with help you and your communities address these questions about your role/s in the economic system?**