Middle-class standing confers considerable, yet invisible, advantage in American society. Beyond greater material resources, the hidden advantage of middle-class standing is psychological: a sense of ownership, influence, entitlement, and control over oneself and the world. The middle-class experience, defined here by the attainment of a four-year college degree, encourages people to see themselves as independent actors, free to choose their possible selves and to create their future paths. For many working-class Americans, who have less than a four-year college degree, this independent sense of self is largely out of reach. Working-class standing typically denies people the material resources, the authority or status, and the cultural knowledge or information needed to influence the world according to personal preference and to experience the self as an independent, freely choosing actor.

The middle-class standard of the independent self has increasingly become the default American standard for how to think, feel, and act in the world (Twenge 2006; Twenge and Campbell 2009). In mainstream American contexts, this standard is promoted as the cultural ideal and is widely perceived as the “right” way to be a person. This middle-class self is not just a matter of individual attitudes or beliefs; it is an understanding of what it means to be a person that is built into and promoted by the social machinery—law, politics, education, employment, media, and health care—of mainstream American society. For example, the middle-class independent self is reflected in the idea of the “reasonable man” of the law, the “authentic self” of clinical and counseling psychology, and the “rational actor” of economics (Markus and Schwartz 2010). Although the independent self is widely accepted as the cultural standard, it is not the natural, normal, neutral, or even the most effective way of being a person (Markus and Hamedani 2007; Markus and Kitayama 2010). In-
stead, it is a privileged and culture-specific understanding of what it means to be a person that flows seamlessly from the resources, opportunities, and experiences linked with middle-class American standing in society (Snibbe and Markus 2005; chapter 8, this volume).

In mainstream America, one important consequence of the proliferation of the cultural standard of the independent self, and the central theme of this chapter, is that working-class Americans are often unfairly measured against these cultural norms, despite their limited opportunities to act accordingly. Specifically, this chapter first highlights the way in which the pervasive ideas, practices, and institutions of mainstream America are structured according to the middle-class understanding of behavior as independent. Then it reveals how the exclusive reliance on these middle-class understandings can inadvertently disadvantage working-class Americans, who often are equipped with a different style of agency that is defined not by independence and separation from others but by interdependence and connection with others (see DiMaggio, chapter 2 of this volume, for discussion of the role of cross-class interactions in generating inequality).

We refer to the independent understandings of behavior common in middle-class American contexts as the independent model of agency. This model assumes that normatively appropriate actions are independent from others and the social context; freely chosen, personally controllable, and contingent on one’s preferences, intentions, and goals; and directed toward influencing and standing out from others (Markus and Kitayama 2003). Alternatively, we refer to the interdependent understandings of behavior that are prevalent in working-class contexts as the interdependent model of agency. This model assumes that normatively appropriate actions are interdependent with others; responsive to and contingent on expectations of others, social roles, situations, and the larger social context; and directed toward adjusting to and fitting in with others.

Throughout this chapter, we focus on variation in models of agency based on experiences in different social-class contexts. We use the term middle class to refer to individuals who have earned a four-year degree and working class to refer to individuals who have not.¹ The chapter contains four sections. The first describes the growing, yet largely unrecognized, social-class divide in America. The second explains how this divide systematically influences people’s conceptions of the “good” or “right” way to act as a person in the world. The third describes mainstream America as a middle-class world that is built according to middle-class understandings of agency as independent. Finally, the fourth section summarizes research that illustrates how the proliferation of the independent model as the default standard of behavior produces a hidden disadvantage for working-class Americans.

THE SOCIAL-CLASS DIVIDE

In the past fifty years, the social-class divide between the working class and the middle class has continued to grow (Burkhauser et al. 2009; Picketty and Saez 2003). In terms of the resource divide in the United States, income inequality is at an all-time high and has increased dramatically since the 1970s (Saez 2010). For example, in the 1970s the top 1 percent of Americans earned 9 percent of the total income, and the top
10 percent earned 33 percent of total income. By 2008 the top 1 percent of Americans earned 21 percent of the total income and the top 10 percent earned 48 percent of the total income (Saez 2010). In other words, the top tenth of Americans currently earn nearly half of the total income in America—nearly a two-fold increase from three decades earlier. The same pattern is reflected in the income earned by the chief executive officers of the largest U.S. corporations relative to the average American. In 1980 chief executive officers earned forty-two times as much money as the average American, whereas in 2001 they earned 531 times as much as the average American (Frank, Levine, and Dijk 2010).

One consequence of these growing material divides is that many people in working-class contexts are increasingly disconnected from the resources and skills needed to take full advantage of the opportunities that American society has to offer. Working-class contexts offer limited access to the material resources and cultural capital that enable the middle class to act as autonomous agents, to freely choose and control their fates, and to pull themselves up by their proverbial bootstraps. For example, working-class Americans more often live in neighborhoods that have limited or no access to stores with healthy food, high-quality schools, parks or facilities in which to exercise, and health care for their children (Kozol 1991; Morland et al. 2002). As for cultural capital, they are also less likely to know how to successfully negotiate the types of social interactions that foster upward mobility (chapter 7, this volume).

Given these differences in material resources and cultural capital, social-class standing powerfully predicts both the barriers to opportunities that people encounter and their chances of realizing the American dream—the belief that with hard work and effort Americans can improve their social standing and achieve their dreams. Adults with lower social-class standing, for example, are at higher risk for various chronic diseases (for example, heart disease and diabetes) and die younger than adults with higher social-class standing (Adler et al. 1994; Adler et al. 1993; Chen, Martin, and Matthews 2006; Marmot, Shipley, and Rose 1984). Lower class standing for adults also carries over to their children’s educational prospects. Alexander Astin and Leticia Oseguera (2004) report that students who have two parents without college degrees have only a 9 percent chance of attending highly selective universities, whereas students who have two parents with college degrees have a 62 percent chance. As a result of this growing divide, the American dream is largely inaccessible to working-class Americans, regardless of sustained hard work and effort.

SOCIAL-CLASS CONTEXTS SHAPE WAYS OF BEING A PERSON

The material and social conditions of working- and middle-class contexts foster and promote different cultural models of agency, or sets of ideas and practices about how to be a culturally appropriate person (Markus and Kitayama 2003). These models guide individual behavior and provide a blueprint for interpreting one’s own and others’ behavior. Understanding how social class shapes models of agency requires attention both to the material resources—such as income, accumulated wealth, and access to transportation—and to the social resources—such as relationships with family and friends—that are available in different social-class contexts. It also re-
quires consideration of how the availability of these material and social resources shapes the way people are able to act (for example, whether the context provides the opportunity to influence the situation). How people act over time, in turn, influences which types of behavior will be understood as normal, appropriate, and valued (Bourdieu 1977; Correll 2004).

How, then, do the material and social resources prevalent in diverse social-class contexts shape patterns of behavior and psychological functioning? Consider how the resources of middle-class American contexts—those characterized by the attainment of a four-year college degree—encourage the development of independent agency (Markus and Kitayama 2003). These middle-class contexts provide greater access to economic resources (Day and Newburger 2002; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991) and to opportunities for choice, control, and influence than do working-class contexts (Kohn 1969). People in middle-class contexts also tend to have more predictable environments, to encounter fewer environmental risks, and to have better physical health (Adler and Snibbe 2003; Chen 2004). The plentiful economic resources provide different pathways to adulthood. Compared with the working class, middle-class individuals are more likely to be encouraged to leave home, to go away to a four-year college or university, and to find their own way in life. As a result, they are more likely to move to multiple geographic locations throughout their lives (Argyle 1994), to have extended social networks (Bowman, Kitayama, and Nisbett 2009), and to spend more time in relationships that are freely chosen and based on personal interests or preferences (Reay et al. 2001; Rossi 2001).

The material and social conditions prevalent in middle-class contexts foster particular socialization patterns that also play an important role in fostering norms of independence. Through the experience of attaining four-year college degrees, middle-class individuals learn that their opinions and ideas are respected and that promoting oneself, being confident, and standing out are valued and rewarded activities. When these individuals become parents, they foster and promote these culture-specific values and norms through their interactions with their children. For example, middle-class parents engage in concerted cultivation, or efforts to elaborate children's personal preferences and interests (chapter 4, this volume). They also give their children a variety of opportunities for self-expression through choices such as what to eat, whom to play with, what activities to participate in, and what books to read (chapter 10, this volume; Miller, Cho, and Bracey 2005). Through these interactions, parents convey to children that their thoughts and feelings are important and that they are on equal footing with everyone else (Wiley et al. 1998). The convergence of material and social conditions prevalent in middle-class contexts, coupled with the socialization processes these conditions foster, allows children to experience themselves as independent agents, to develop the sense that they are in charge and the world is their own, and to grow into adults who reflect and further promote the middle-class model of agency.

In contrast, the conditions of working-class American contexts—characterized by having less than a four-year college degree—encourage the development of interdependent agency. These contexts offer less economic capital, more environmental constraints, greater risks and uncertainty, and less choice, control, and influence than middle-class American contexts (Kraus, Piff, and Keltner 2009; Lachman and Weaver 1998; Patillo-McCoy 1999). Given limited economic resources and parents who have
not attained a four-year degree, working-class students are more likely to attend a local community college or to go straight from high school to work. There is little opportunity for trying on a variety of potential future identities and for reflecting on how to define the self. Moreover, people who do not leave home to attend college are more likely to live in the same town for most of their lives, to have frequent contact with family, to be embedded in densely structured social networks, and to maintain lifelong friendships (Argyle 1994; Lamont 2000; Markus et al. 2004).

The material and social conditions prevalent in working-class contexts foster particular socialization patterns that also play an important role in fostering norms of interdependence. By spending their lives in a more unpredictable and uncertain environment, in which there is often no economic safety net to fall back on, parents quickly learn the dangers of stepping out of line and learn the value of following the rules, working together, and helping one another in times of need. Consequently, their children are more likely to learn that “life is not just about them,” that the world is “not their own,” and that they need to fit in, play by the rules, and make the best of the situation (Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003; Miller, Cho, and Bracey 2005). The convergence of the material and social conditions prevalent in working-class contexts, coupled with the patterns of socialization these conditions foster, encourages people to recognize the importance of interdependence: of fitting in and being responsive to others’ needs, interests, and preferences.

THE INFLUENCE OF INDEPENDENT AGENCY ON THE STRUCTURE OF MAINSTREAM AMERICAN CONTEXTS

Models of agency not only reside in individual minds; they are also reflected in and promoted by the ideas, practices, and institutions that structure people’s everyday experiences (Markus and Kitayama 2003). In mainstream America, institutions are largely organized and framed according to the independent model of agency. This model of agency is so thoroughly ingrained in the cultural and social machinery that American institutions—in education, health care, politics, and the media—promote middle-class expectations for how to act as the default standard (Adams et al. 2008). But there are other viable models for how to think, feel, and act as a person in the world.3

American colleges and universities reflect and promote the independent model of agency as the cultural standard. Although most universities seek to create a diverse student body, these efforts do not always translate into diverse expectations of students. In fact, most American universities convey the message that being an independent agent is the right or best way to be a student (Fryberg and Markus 2007; Kim 2002; Li 2003). Students are asked to make their own choices, to be individually motivated, to develop their own interests, and to pave their own innovative pathways. Invitation letters, student guidebooks, and mission statements communicate these expectations. Even before students arrive on campus, they are told how to be a student. For example, the Stanford University student guidebook informs students, “It is not the task, first and foremost, of an advisor to tell you what to do. ... Your advisor should be seen as a compass, not as a roadmap” (Stanford University 2004). In other words, students are instructed not to rely on others for guidance but instead to
know what they want and to find a way to achieve it on their own. These messages are by no means unique to Stanford. Washington University in Saint Louis encourages students to “create your own path” (Washington University 2009) and Harvard University tells students that the purpose of education is to “liberate students to explore, to create, to challenge, and to lead” (Harvard University 2009). Across university and college campuses nationwide, students are expected to enact these middle-class norms of independent agency.

In the health care domain, people are similarly expected to navigate the system as independent agents (Iyengar 2010). Throughout all stages of the process, patients are expected to research and choose doctors who fit with their personal preferences and values. An ad for the University of Chicago Medical Center features a middle-aged woman in front of a laptop and states, “Getting sick wasn’t her choice. How she gets better is.” The ad provides potential patients with the following script describing the expected movement through the health care system: “You’re up all hours crawling the web to find every option, advanced treatment and nugget of hope you can. You want two or three—even four—opinions from the brightest medical minds in the world. And when it comes to making decisions about your health care, you’re in charge. You’re at the forefront of medicine.” Patients are expected to seek out and explore multiple treatment options (“two or three—even four”), to be fully in charge, and to make their own decisions—that is, to act with independent agency.

Patients are also expected to make their own choices because Americans presume that individual choice is necessary to maximize positive health outcomes. For example, describing what he viewed as the essential role of choice in prescription drug plans for senior citizens, President George W. Bush said, “The more choices you have, the more likely it is you’ll be able to find a program that suits your specific needs” (Thaler and Sunstein 2008, 159). Choice is so central to the idea of health care in America that health policy debates center around the importance of keeping choice in the hands of the individual consumer. For instance, in opposition to recent efforts to pass universal health care legislation, a Cato Institute advertisement claimed, “When it comes to healthcare, what really matters is who decides. Under reform proposals before Congress, government would take over more and more of your health care decisions” (a 2009 Cato Institute healthcare advertisement). The message conveyed is that patients should reject government intervention and protect their individual right to decide what types of health care best fit their individual needs.

In mainstream American media, across a wide variety of advertising campaigns, the language of individual choice is used to appeal to and promote the independent model of agency. Burger King, for example, declares, “We give your kids more than toys. We give them choices.” American Family Insurance uses the same language: “Insurance is a matter of choice.” Beyond consumer products, advertisements encourage people to adopt healthy eating and exercise habits (“Exercise, it’s your choice”) and to support policies, such as school vouchers (“School choice means better educational opportunity”), that are designed to increase the number of choices available to individuals. These advertising campaigns promote the idea that individual choice maximizes freedom and produces positive outcomes (Iyengar 2010; Iyengar and Lepper 2000; Markus and Schwartz 2010; Schwartz 2004).

Across education, health care, and the media, people are expected not only to
choose but to choose in a way that affirms and reinforces their experience of independent agency. That is, they are expected to use choice to display their individuality, uniqueness, independence, and separation from others. In fact, in some advertisements the link between choice and individuality is made explicit. Camel cigarettes, for example, encourages people to “choose anything but ordinary.” The Harvard Business School advises students to “break free. Start thinking and acting differently.” These messages about independent agency are not unique to American education, health care, or media. They are pervasive in mainstream American culture.

RELIANCE ON INDEPENDENT AGENCY DISADVANTAGES WORKING-CLASS AMERICANS: THREE AREAS OF RESEARCH

Given the working-class emphasis on interdependent models of agency—on the importance of being in relationships with others, of fitting in, and of being responsive to others—the reliance on the independent model of agency as the cultural standard creates the experience of a cultural divide that serves to systematically disadvantage working-class Americans. To illuminate this claim, we review research studies from three areas of focus: everyday choice, the transition to a four-year college, and responses to natural disasters.

Everyday Choice

Choice is a central component of the independent model of agency. By making choices, people in middle-class American contexts are able to enact independent agency: they exert control over their environments, express their individual selves, individuate the self from others, and influence the world according to personal preference (Savani, Stephens, and Markus 2011). Given the centrality of choice to independent agency, individuals participating in mainstream American institutions, such as education, health care, and law, are often required to make choices with little support or guidance from others. This choice requirement might have very different consequences for hypothetical parents from different social-class contexts who seek to choose the best school for their children.

The first parent, Lauren, is a practicing lawyer and the mother of a ten-year-old boy. On receiving the book that explains the defining characteristics of the thirty different public elementary school options in the area, she sits down to review the materials and to make a decision about where to enroll her son. Among other issues, Lauren considers teacher quality, teaching pedagogies, class schedules, cost effectiveness, commuting times, and student diversity. She supplements the information with her own Internet research—perusing blogs, forums, and other sites that provide firsthand accounts from parents with children at the different schools. She ponders the options for a few days and debates with her husband and colleagues the pluses and minuses of different options. She ranks the options and decides on three schools in the area that she wants to visit and into which she might want to enroll her son.

The second parent, Sharon, is a waitress at a local diner and the mother of an
eleven-year-old girl. Like Lauren, Sharon receives the book that explains the key features of the same thirty school options. Although she wants the best for her daughter, Sharon often works two shifts at the diner and has little control over her schedule. Given the limited resources of her working-class context and her limited prior experience with choice, she finds the number of schools and the process of considering the different dimensions of those schools to be overwhelming. She tries to reach out to the school district for advice about the best school for her daughter, but she is told that it is her job to determine which school is most likely to meet her daughter’s particular needs, interests, preferences, and goals. School employees have been trained not to interfere but instead to ensure that parents independently choose which school is best for their children. They assume that parents are best equipped to choose for their children, and they do not want to be held responsible for biasing parents in the decisionmaking process. In the end, given Sharon’s work schedule and the fact that she does not have a car to take her daughter to an academically rigorous school in the neighboring city, she picks the school that is close to home and most conveniently located.

The stories of Lauren and Sharon illuminate two very different experiences with the act of choosing. While both may find selecting a school stressful, the process and expectations of independent choice lead to quite different outcomes. Lauren finds the process time consuming, but given her own extensive educational experiences, she has the necessary time, resources, and cultural capital needed to identify a set of criteria that reflect her son’s preferences, to measure the schools against these preferences, and, in the end, to choose the school that is the best fit for her son’s needs and that will give him a solid foundation for future academic success. Sharon, in contrast, lacks the time, resources, and middle-class cultural capital needed to choose the school best equipped to meet the needs of her daughter. As a result, she ultimately picks the school that is closest to home rather than a school that will provide her daughter with the best chance of success in a middle-class world.

This requirement to choose is pervasive in American culture, in large part because individual choice is considered a fundamental right, an indicator of freedom, and the route to individual self-expression and agency. In other words, it is assumed that the provision of choice bestows freedom and that not providing choice is equivalent to taking away people’s freedom. Empirically testing this assumption, Alana Snibbe and Hazel Markus (2005) conducted a series of studies that asked whether choice is central to people’s conception of agency and freedom in working-class contexts. In one study, shoppers were approached and asked to evaluate one of five pens. In a free-choice condition, participants chose a pen, wrote with it, and then evaluated it. In a usurped-choice condition, just as participants chose a pen, the experimenter said, “I’m sorry, you can’t have that one, it is my last,” and then gave the participant another pen to write with and evaluate. Middle-class participants reported being upset when their choice was denied; as a result, those in the usurped-choice condition were less happy with the pen than those in the free-choice condition. Working-class participants, in contrast, liked the pens in both conditions equally well. In other words, choice was less central to agency for the working-class participants than for the middle-class participants.

In another set of studies, we explored whether the interests of others take prece-
dence over individual choice in working-class contexts (Stephens, Fryberg, and Markus 2011). In one study, an experimenter offered participants a pen as a thank-you gift for their participation. Participants were told that if they wanted a different pen, the experimenter could offer them a choice of other pens. Working-class participants were more likely than the middle-class participants to accept the gift from the experimenter rather than ask to choose for themselves. These studies suggest that for working-class Americans focusing on and attending to others (interdependent agency) is normative and often takes precedence over choosing for oneself (independent agency).

Next, we examined whether a second assumption of independent agency—that choice is an act of independence—fits with the experiences of working-class Americans (Stephens, Markus, and Townsend 2007). We hypothesized that working-class participants would use choice not to distinguish themselves from others but to be similar to and to connect with others. In one study, we approached college students and asked them to choose a pen for an alleged marketing study. After participants made their own pen choice, they were exposed to one of two different conditions. In the similar condition, a confederate approached and said, “I would like a pen just like hers”; in the different condition, the confederate approached and asked for a pen that was different from the pen that the earlier participant had selected. While middle-class participants liked their pen more when the other person’s choice made them appear unique and different, working-class participants liked their pens more when the other person’s choice revealed similarity in preferences.

In a related study, firefighters and students with master’s degrees in business were asked to imagine a scenario in which they bought a new car and then the next day their friend purchased the exact same car. As in the pen study, the middle-class students said that they would feel irritated that their friend had taken away the uniqueness of their choice. In contrast, the working-class firefighters said that they would feel flattered or happy about their friend’s choice. One working-class participant exclaimed, “If I bought the car that I wanted and then my friend bought it too, I would say, ‘Great, let’s start a car club.’”

The assumption that choice equals agency and independence reflects the model of agency that is prevalent in middle-class contexts but diverges from the understandings of choice that are common among working-class Americans. Our studies reveal that working-class Americans understand acts of independence and individual choice as less important than acts of interdependence and connection to others. If highly consequential, mainstream American contexts are built according to the middle-class standard that people must choose independently and without others’ influence, what then are the implications for working-class Americans, who often choose among undesirable alternatives, have limited resources to select the best option, and understand choice differently?

The reliance on an independent model of agency is likely to put working-class Americans at a significant disadvantage. In the case of school choice, as illustrated earlier with the example of Sharon, parents are often required to choose a school for their children without guidance from the school staff who are most knowledgeable about which schools are the most effective in meeting peoples’ needs (Thaler and Sunstein 2008). One problem with this approach is that working-class parents are
much less likely than middle-class parents to have the time and resources to research school options and to choose the school that will best educate their children (chapter 4, this volume). Thus a lack of advice or guidance is perhaps especially harmful to these working-class parents. Similarly, the health care system assumes that the consumer is independent and has the time and resources to make the right choice. Making a choice among treatment plans may be difficult even for those who have practice making choices and who have middle-class cultural capital at their disposal to identify the best option. For those who have less experience in making choices and little knowledge about how the health care system works, navigating the system may prove daunting, especially without sufficient guidance from someone who is knowledgeable about the potential benefits of various options.

Transition to College

Higher education ostensibly seeks to provide equal opportunities to all students from different circumstances and backgrounds (Bowen et al. 2005). The reality, however, is that American university settings are not neutral institutions but instead reflect and promote particular cultural norms and expectations of students. These understandings derive largely from the independent model of agency that is normative in middle-class contexts (Fryberg and Markus 2007; Greenfield 1994; Li 2003). The independent model matches the expectations of students from middle-class backgrounds, in this case, continuing-generation students whose parents have four-year college degrees. However, the independent model does not match the expectations of students from working-class backgrounds, in this case, first-generation students whose parents do not have four-year college degrees.

Imagine, for example, two students—one continuing-generation college student and one first-generation college student—who arrive on campus for the first time. Julie, the continuing-generation student, is excited to set up her dorm room and to discuss potential classes and activities with her academic adviser. For years her parents have talked about all the amazing experiences they had in college, and she has always envisioned what it would be like. Given what she has learned from her parents, Julie feels well prepared academically and personally, and she knows what to expect. When she meets with her academic adviser, her enthusiasm and confidence is reinforced. Her adviser asks about her interests and goals and tells her about the many exciting opportunities on campus that can help her achieve those goals. Julie cannot wait to explore all her interests, map out her academic plans, and take charge of her future. For the first time, she feels like an adult who is free to choose her own path.

Jen, in contrast, is the first person in her family to attend college—a first-generation college student. She has worked her whole life for the opportunity to go to college, but she has no idea what to expect when she gets there, and she is not sure if she has what it takes to succeed. When she arrives on campus, she is surprised by the confidence of the other students. She wonders whether they are as prepared and as confident as they seem and whether her own uncertainty is a sign that she is not ready. These concerns are amplified by her first meeting with her academic adviser. He is welcoming but is not very interested in getting to know her. His agenda in-
volves identifying her long-term goals and plans, but Jen is unsure about his motives. For example, he offers Jen many choices of potential courses, activities, and majors, but when she seems confused, he is unwilling to advise her about which options might be best for her. She wonders whether he really cares or just wants to get her out of the office as quickly as possible. Jen leaves feeling intimidated, overwhelmed, and even more uncertain about whether the college environment is the place for her.

This example reveals how two students from different social-class backgrounds can experience and respond differently to the same college culture of independence. For Julie, the independent model was familiar and served as a sign that she belonged in the college environment. In the terms of our research, she experienced a cultural match between her own cultural models and the cultural models that were institutionalized in the university setting. For Jen, however, the focus on independent agency signaled that she was out of her element and led her to question whether she should be there. She experienced a cultural mismatch between her own cultural models and those that were institutionalized in the university setting.

Building on theories of social identity threat (Davies et al. 2002; Murphy, Steele, and Gross 2007; Steele and Aronson 1995; Steele 2010), we sought to capture the experience of cultural mismatch for first-generation students (Stephens et al., forthcoming) and to examine its consequences. Identifying the hypothesized mismatch required an analysis of both universities’ and students’ expectations. First, to assess the university culture, we surveyed a diverse sample of high-level university administrators from the top fifty national universities and the top twenty-five liberal arts colleges in the United States (U.S. News and World Report 2010). Specifically, high-level university administrators, who are experts in both creating and maintaining institutional norms, were asked to indicate their institutions’ expectations for college students. They were presented with six pairs of institutional expectations, each divided into one statement reflecting independence and another interdependence, and asked to choose the one most often emphasized at their university (for example, “developing personal opinions” versus “appreciating opinions of others”). As expected, we found that more than two-thirds of administrators (72 percent) characterized the university culture as more independent than interdependent.

To assess students’ motives for attending college, we surveyed a sample of incoming students at a large private university and asked them about the reasons why they chose to attend college. They were presented with twelve options that reflected either independent or interdependent motives for attending college and were asked to mark each motive that applied to them. We found that continuing-generation students’ motives for attending college focused on independence, self-exploration, and self-development and therefore matched the university culture’s focus on independence. In contrast, first-generation college students’ motives diverged from the university culture’s focus on independence: they were less likely than continuing-generation students to say that they were motivated to attend college for reasons relating to independence (for example, to explore their personal interests) but much more likely to say that they were motivated by interdependent reasons (for example, to give back to their communities or to help their families).

Finally, we examined the performance consequences of a cultural match or mismatch for first-generation students. Specifically, a series of experiments—one at a
public and one at a private university—created the experience of a cultural match or mismatch and then assessed students’ performance on a common measure of verbal ability (anagrams) and a common measure of spatial ability (tangrams). Participants were randomly assigned to read one of two welcome messages, ostensibly from their universities, composed by us to reflect either the independent or the interdependent model of agency. Adapted from actual university materials, the letter reflecting independent agency framed the university culture and college experience as one in which students are guided to pave their own pathways, to explore personal interests, and to learn to work independently. In contrast, the message reflecting interdependence framed the university culture and college experience in the context of being part of a community, working collaboratively, and connecting with fellow students and faculty. After reading a message, the participants completed one of the performance tasks. As expected, when the college culture was framed as independent (a cultural mismatch with first-generation students’ motives), first-generation students experienced the tasks as more difficult and performed less well than continuing-generation students. Yet when the college culture was framed as interdependent (a cultural match with first-generation students’ motives), this performance gap was eliminated (Stephens et al., forthcoming).

These studies suggest that American universities’ focus on independence represents the perspectives of middle-class students and thereby places them at a distinct advantage. The same norms of independence can disadvantage first-generation students from working-class backgrounds, whose interdependent motives do not match the dominant norms of the college culture. As a result, first-generation college students often feel uncomfortable in college settings, construe academic tasks as difficult, and fail to perform up to their potential. If universities want to provide truly equal opportunities for all students, they might begin by recognizing that there is more than one way to succeed as a student and by expanding the university cultural repertoire to include more ideas and practices of interdependence. For example, universities’ guidebooks and admissions letters could be adapted to include more messages about the importance of connection to others and working together. Teachers might think creatively about how to expand teaching practices to recognize and harness first-generation students’ relatively interdependent motives, for example, by building trusting relationships in the classroom or by encouraging students to study with their peers and interact more in groups.

Response to Natural Disasters

The assumption that people freely choose their actions is widely used to explain negative life outcomes such as obesity, disease, poverty, academic underperformance, and unexpected tragedy (Hanson and Hanson 2006; Savani, Stephens, and Markus 2011). These assumptions about choice can disadvantage working-class Americans, whose contexts often place constraints on behavior and provide fewer opportunities to “freely choose” their actions. For example, after Hurricane Katrina destroyed the city of New Orleans, many outside observers assumed that the survivors had had a choice about whether to stay or evacuate before the storm. In response to the rising death toll in New Orleans, Federal Emergency Management Agency director Michael
Brown said, "That’s going to be attributable a lot to people who . . . chose not to evacuate." Similarly, Secretary of Homeland Security Michael Chertoff explained, "Officials called for a mandatory evacuation. Some people chose not to obey that order. That was a mistake on their part" (CNN Transcripts 2005, 60–72). This assumption of choice differentially reflected the realities of residents in different social-class contexts. Here we present interview excerpts from the personal narratives of two survivors who had divergent experiences with the hurricane.

This assumption of free choice coincided with and reflected the reality of a male middle-class survivor, who describes the decisionmaking process leading to his evacuation before the hurricane hit:

Initially my wife and I didn’t know what to do. Whether we were gonna stay, whether we were gonna leave, it was all up in the air. She was very nervous about it. Uh, we were slightly panicked. At first I decided that I would stick around during the storm so that I could check on our house and my wife would evacuate. But when we saw the news reports on Saturday my wife said, “You’re not gonna stay. You are coming—you and I are leaving and we’re gonna get out of town.” I said, “Where are we gonna stay?” and she said, “There’s no place in the area. Jackson’s full, Baton Rouge is full, Houston is filling up,” and she couldn’t even find a hotel in Memphis so I suggest[ed] we stay in west Memphis, and we tried to get a reservation online at the Red Roof and that didn’t work and so I called them in person and made a reservation and they accepted it. So, I stayed up all night watching the weather reports to see what was gonna happen. My friend left at 2:33 in the morning and I passed out on the couch for maybe an hour. I got up at five, we loaded up the car figuring we’d only be gone for a few days at most, and packed our dogs, and me and my wife headed out of town. It took us twelve hours to get to Memphis. . . . So the evacuation went fairly well, I thought, and, the day the hurricane hit, we woke up—we were at the hotel in Memphis and we were watching the news.

Consider, in contrast, the experience of a female working-class survivor who did not have the resources to evacuate:

I started watching the news and that Sunday, it was twenty-four hours before the storm was supposed to hit, and that’s when the mayor got on the TV and he said just get out, just go or what have you. How are we supposed to go anywhere? You understand, for the ones that did leave, they was able to go. They had money. They had this, they had that, you see what I’m saying? My daughter had a little raggedy car that barely moved. So how are we going to leave or what have you, ‘cause we had nowhere to go and no way to get there. . . . But they knew what Katrina was gonna do before Katrina got to New Orleans. You know what I’m sayin? So I feel as though, maybe even the president knew about it. All the way down, I’m speakin’ the chain of command. They knew. They coulda got us out of there, out of that place, when they knew about three major storms, and they knew one of ’em was gonna come in, was gonna hit New Orleans. I feel as though they shoulda got all of the people that’s skilled and can do for theirsself and just help people, you un-
nderstand, like me for instance. Get us out of there. Get everybody out of New Or-
leans. And it wouldn't a been so many deaths. People wouldn't a been choppin'
through their roof, sittin' on their roof. Superdome wouldn't a been like it was. The
Convention Center wouldn't a been like it was. If they would have planned ahead
of time, and you can't tell me they didn't know. 'Cause they knew. Our govern-
ment knew. Everybody. But we just didn't know, you see.

In our research we sought to illuminate the disconnect between the dominant rep-
resentation of survivors' experiences as freely chosen and the experience of the sur-
vivors themselves. We asked observers of the Hurricane Katrina disaster to describe
the residents who stayed for the hurricane and those who evacuated beforehand. We
found that relief workers (for example, from the Red Cross) who had direct contact
with survivors, as well as lay observers who watched the disaster from afar, inter-
preted survivors' actions based on an independent model of agency. Specifically, they
assumed that survivors' actions were unconstrained by the context and that all peo-
ple could have influenced the situation, overcome situational constraints, and found
a way to evacuate before the hurricane hit. As a result, observers thought that the
behavior of residents who stayed behind during the hurricane did not make sense;
they viewed them as lazy, passive, irresponsible, and lacking agency.

Next, we examined the models of agency that the survivors used to make sense of
their own experiences with the hurricane. In interviews with survivors from diverse
social-class contexts, we asked them to tell their stories of what happened to them
before, during, and after the hurricane. Our analysis of the themes common in sur-
vivors' narratives revealed that the middle-class and European American survivors,
most of whom evacuated, understood their actions primarily in terms of choice, in-
dependence, and control. These themes clearly reflected an independent model of
agency. Like the survivor whose story is told earlier in this chapter, many of the
middle-class survivors had the necessary resources (time, money, a place to go) to
make a plan for how to evacuate. If the situation did not go according to their evacu-
ation plan, they then had the resources at their disposal (Internet, phone, money) to
proactively influence the situation and to create another alternative that could meet
their needs.

In contrast, like the survivor who explained that she did not have anywhere to stay
or the necessary transportation to evacuate, the working-class and African American
survivors were much less likely to have the resources necessary to influence the situ-
ation and evacuate before the storm. In contrast to the dominant rhetoric of choice
employed by the media ("Why did they choose to stay?") , most of the survivors who
stayed did not experience their actions as choices. One survivor said, "I didn't have a
choice. Me and my three girls, my children, we didn't have a choice but to stay 'cause
even the family members that came over to the house with the transportation they all
had family with them, so we couldn't—we couldn't all fit in the cars." Instead of fo-
cusing on independence, influence, and choice, the working-class and African Amer-
ican survivors recognized the need to adjust to the constraints of their contexts and
relied on a model of agency that involved connecting to and helping others, being
strong and resilient, and maintaining faith in God (Stephens et al. 2009). These themes
reflect some of the key elements of interdependent agency.

This study illustrates how the dominance of the notion of independent agency,
specifically the assumption that actions are freely chosen, can lead to a misunderstanding of behavior across the social-class divide. Observers’ reliance on an independent model to understand survivors’ actions was consistent with how the middle-class and European American survivors understood their experiences but diverged from the understandings common among the working-class and African American survivors. In this case, the exclusive use of an independent model of agency concealed the relationship between people’s actions and the resource structure of the environment and, in doing so, fostered a lack of empathy for the survivors who stayed and who bore the brunt of the hurricane. Unlike explicit racism or classism, criticism of people on the basis of adherence to cultural norms may not be identified as prejudice but may instead seem like a logical inference from the facts of the situation. However, because independent agency is often possible only for people in middle-class worlds who have access to the types of resources and experiences that foster an independent sense of self, devaluing other forms of agency may be a powerful form of discrimination against people who lack the resources to adhere to middle-class standards for behavior. These types of cultural norms and assumptions about behavior can serve as a potent form of system justification (see, for example, Jost, Kay, and Thorisdottir 2009; Jost and Major 2001). That is, they may serve to justify, maintain, and reproduce the very conditions in society that serve to limit and constrain the types of opportunities that are available to working-class Americans.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

As the power of social class in shaping the economic and social realities of Americans has increased (Saez 2010), so too has the assumption that people are equally autonomous and free to choose their actions (Hanson and Hanson 2006; Twenge 2006). As a consequence, working-class Americans are often susceptible to a double jeopardy: they have less access to the resources that are needed to freely choose their own fates and to create their own futures, yet their fates and futures are erroneously believed to be the sole product of their individual effort or lack thereof. In other words, working-class Americans not only have fewer opportunities to attain the independent self of the middle class but also, because of the prevalence of the ideology of independent agency in mainstream America, are likely to be held accountable or even penalized for the often negative results of their limited opportunities (Savani, Stephens, and Markus 2011; see also Stephens and Levine 2011).

The experience of double jeopardy is, in part, a product of the social machinery of mainstream America. It is built into and promoted by America’s workplaces, schools, and media outlets. Across these highly influential contexts, the widely held and often taken-for-granted message is that people can and should make their own decisions and act accordingly and, in doing so, display their individuality and independence from others. This assumption that all behavior is a product of individual choice and that choice is a natural or universal unit of behavior is the cornerstone of the middle-class standard. The middle-class standard, however, obscures the fact that the ability to freely choose and to proactively influence the world according to personal preference is not equally available to all people.

This inequality hinges on one rarely recognized, yet critical, insight: that experiencing oneself as independent requires a particular set of contextual conditions that
are most readily available in middle-class worlds. For example, freely choosing according to personal preference—the signature of independent agency—cannot occur without the presence of important structural supports. The act of freely choosing requires that people have a number of positive alternatives from which to choose and also requires resources such as financial assets, time, and information to be able to select the most effective option. In many working-class contexts, however, people often do not experience the advantage of freely choosing their actions but are left to choose between a rock and hard place. In other words, when it comes to making choices that satisfy individual preferences, interests, and goals, working-class individuals have fewer desirable or effective alternatives among which to choose, and the resources at their disposal to make a good choice are also quite limited.

Despite the best efforts of social scientists across a variety of disciplines, the understanding that agency is not separate from the sociocultural world remains poorly integrated into popular understandings of behavior. Instead, as this chapter has shown, the popular assumption in mainstream America is that all people, irrespective of place or circumstance, are independent from their contexts and can freely choose their actions. This assumption represents a fundamental misunderstanding of behavior. Although the middle-class standard of the independent self is often taken for granted as the “right” or “best” way to be a person, the reality is that actions are not caused solely by either individual psychological qualities or social contextual influences. All people, even those who experience their actions as separate from the context and unaffected by others, are necessarily shaped by the prevalent cultural norms that structure the contexts in which they operate.

This misunderstanding of behavior has important implications. It serves to disadvantage people in working-class contexts, for whom the middle-class standard of the independent self is often out of reach. It can also inhibit the development of effective programs and policies that seek to remedy the effects of growing social-class inequality. Many such initiatives focus on how to provide more choices for people in schools and in health care. For example, parents with limited resources and information are expected to choose, with limited guidance from the experts, which schools their children will attend. The research presented here suggests that such policies and programs can undermine working-class Americans because they are informed by middle-class standards of acceptable behavior. Creating more effective programs and policies to bridge the social-class divide will require taking into account the divergent forms of agency that pervade different social contexts. Specifically, it will be important to recognize that working-class contexts are often characterized by social responsiveness and interdependence rather than individual choice and independence.

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NOTES

1. Educational attainment is among the best indicators of social class for two key reasons. First, attaining a bachelor’s degree predicts job stability and is often a prerequisite to finding a high-status professional job. It also confers substantial advantages in lifetime earn-
ings. Specifically, college-educated people make twice as much money over the course of their lives as those who are high school educated (Day and Newburger 2002; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Second, among the three commonly used indicators of social-class status (education, income, and occupation), education is the indicator that is most closely associated with the lifestyle, behavior, beliefs, and psychological tendencies related to agency (Kohn and Schoenbach 1983; Matthews et al. 1989; Newcomb 1943).

2. We use the term cultural model of agency rather than cultural model of self because our research refers broadly to how people understand the sources, goals, and consequences of action.

3. While independence is the cultural standard in America, in most of the world interdependence is the cultural standard (Markus and Hamedani 2007).

REFERENCES


