Social Class and Models of Competence:

How Gateway Institutions Disadvantage Working-Class Americans and How to Intervene

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Why do I still experience a great feeling of shame when clearing a student's dirty plate? Embarrassment is not an adequate term to describe what I felt when those parents looked at me, clearly stupefied, thinking, "This waitress teaches my child?" It is a shame I share with many of my blue-collar colleagues, a belief that society deems our work inferior, that we have settled on or chosen these paths because we do not have the skills necessary to acquire something better. (Bronson, 2014, p. 35)

Brittany Bronson occupies the unusual space between social classes: university professor by day, Las Vegas waitress by night. In the pursuit of her middle-class academic aspirations she takes on a working-class[1] position, a "survival job" as she calls it, to make ends meet. When Bronson takes on her working-class role as a waitress, she sometimes encounters her middle- and upper-class students and their parents. According to Bronson, these meetings risk "destroying the façade of success" that she presents to her students in the classroom. Even though Bronson and her restaurant colleagues know that their occupations are "skilled" and require a range of specific competencies to be effective, mainstream American society views blue-collar work like her waitressing job as "unskilled" and "inferior." In other words, mainstream society does not recognize the skills involved in Bronson's waitressing role as competence. Faced with this realization, she reports experiencing a sense of "shame."

Bronson's encounters with her students and their parents reveal an important, but rarely recognized, assumption about what types of skills "count" as competence in mainstream American society. Specifically, middle-class ways of being competent (e.g., the behaviors

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[1] To incorporate diverse interdisciplinary literatures that define social class differently, we use the term *working-class* to refer to individuals in contexts on the bottom half of the social class divide, including people who have attained less than a four-year college degree or who have relatively lower incomes or lower-status occupations. *Middle-class* refers to individuals in contexts on the top half of the social class divide, including people who have attained at least a four-year college degree or who have relatively higher incomes or higher-status occupations.

required by her role as a professor) are often seen as the only "right" way to be competent. Yet, as Bronson's story suggests, there is more than one way to be competent. And, as we will argue in this chapter, different social class contexts require different ways of being competent to be effective. For example, to be competent in her working-class role as a waitress, Bronson must respond to the needs of her customers, adjust to changing situations, and rely on and provide support to her coworkers to get the job done. On the other hand, to be competent in her middle-class role as a university professor, Bronson must display confidence, take charge of the classroom, and express her opinions to her students.

In this chapter, we document and describe how social class shapes competence in four sections. Considering the context-contingent nature of competence, we adopt Elliot & Dweck's (2005) definition of competence as "a fundamental motivation that serves the evolutionary role of helping people develop and adapt to their environment" (p. 6). First, we examine how different social class contexts promote divergent understandings of how to be competent, which we will refer to as *models of competence* (cf., Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004). Second, we provide evidence that the middle-class model of competence has become institutionalized in contemporary society, while the working-class model of competence has been excluded. In the third section, we show how this institutionalization of the middle-class model of competence can disadvantage working-class individuals by limiting access to opportunities, undermining their performance, and leading them to be evaluated as less competent in key gateway institutions. We suggest that this mismatch between middle-class standards and working-class models of competence can create a cycle of inequality that prevents the working class from attaining upward mobility. Finally, to conclude, we propose interventions at both

individual and institutional levels that have the potential to reduce some of the social class

inequalities perpetuated by this reliance on middle-class models of competence.

Social Class Promotes Different Models of Competence

Social class contexts provide an important source of variation in models of competence.

These models of competence derive from culture-specific understandings of what it means to be

a good or appropriate person in the world—what previous research has referred to as *models of*

self (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). Research conducted in a variety

of cultural contexts has identified two common models of self that provide different blueprints

for how people should relate to others and to the social world, and, more specifically, be

competent (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Plaut & Markus,

2005). An *independent* model of self assumes that the normatively appropriate person should

influence the context, be separate or distinct from other people, and act freely based on personal

motives, goals, and preferences (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). An *interdependent* model of self, in

contrast, assumes that the normatively appropriate person should adjust to the conditions of the

context, be connected to others, and respond to the needs, preferences, and interests of others.

As outlined in Figure 1, understanding how social class shapes these models of self and

competence requires an analysis of both the material resources (e.g., income, access to high-

quality education) and the social resources (e.g., relationships with family and friends) available

in different social class contexts. These conditions are important because they shape the patterns

of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world that are possible for people to enact, as well as the

ways of being that are likely to be effective. How people are able to act, over time, will shape the

ways of being a person that are likely to become normative and preferred.

Middle-class American contexts promote an independent model of self and competence (see Figure 1). In middle-class contexts, people have greater economic capital, fewer environmental constraints, higher power and status, and greater opportunities for choice, influence, and control than do people in working-class contexts (Day & Newburger 2002; Kohn, 1969; Patillo-McCoy, 1999; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). They also tend to have higher levels of geographic mobility, given the frequent need to move away from home to attend college and to pursue subsequent career opportunities (Argyle, 1994). These material realities promote socialization practices that convey to children a sense of self-importance and individual entitlement (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). For example, parents often engage in concerted cultivation, or efforts to identify and elaborate their children's personal preferences, ideas, and opinions (Lareau, 2003). Through these ways of interacting with their children, parents convey to children the message that "the world is your oyster" and "your voice matters."
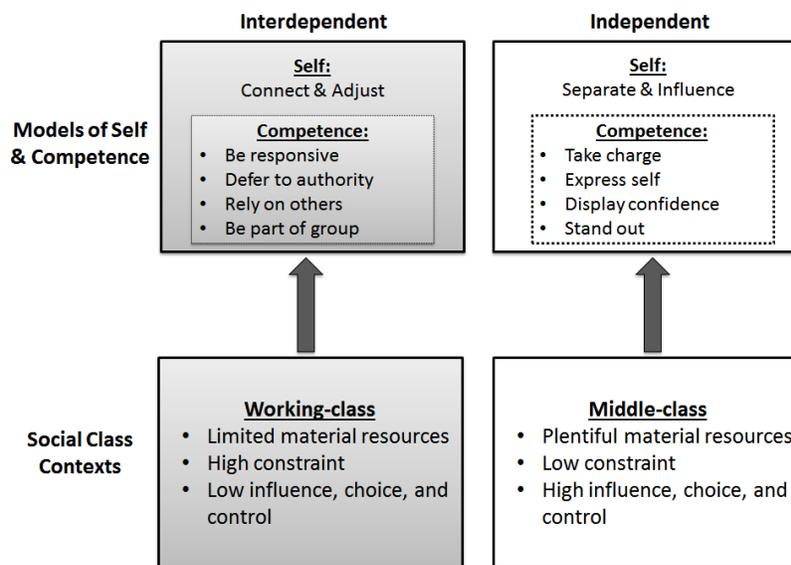

Figure 1. Social Class Contexts Shape Models of Self and Competence

In response to these material and social conditions, middle-class individuals have ample opportunities to influence the situation according to their own personal preferences, to develop confidence and a sense of optimism, and to express their ideas and opinions. Over time, these ways of being a person foster a sense of self as autonomous or separate from others and as able to influence the world according to personal preferences. As shown in Figure 1, reflecting this independent model of self, an independent model of competence stresses that individuals should take charge of their environments, express what they think and feel, show confidence, and stand out from the group. Thus, when Bronson, engages in these actions in her role as a university professor, she is enacting an independent model of competence and is, therefore, seen as competent by her middle-class students and peers.

Working-class contexts, on the other hand, promote interdependent models of self and competence (see Figure 1). In working-class contexts, people have less access to economic capital, confront more environmental constraints, are exposed to greater risks and uncertainty, and have fewer opportunities for choice, influence, and control than do people in middle-class contexts (Chen & Matthews, 2001; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). Since working-class individuals do not typically go away to attend college, they often stay in the same geographic location for their entire lives, frequently interact with family members, and tend to be embedded in densely structured social networks (Argyle, 1994; Lamont, 2000; Markus et al., 2004). These material realities often promote socialization practices that encourage children to recognize their place in the social hierarchy, to follow the rules and social norms, and to be responsive to others' needs (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Kohn, 1969; Kusserow, 1999; Lamont, 2000; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). For example, in working-class contexts, parents often emphasize to their children the

message that "it's not just about you" and "you can't always get what you want" (cf. Miller et

al., 2005; Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

In response to contexts characterized by these material and social conditions, working-

class individuals must adjust themselves to others and the social context, be tough and strong,

and rely on close others (e.g., family, friends) for support (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014).

Over time, these ways of being a person foster a sense of self as connected to others and as

adjusting to one's environment (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). As shown in Figure 1, reflecting

this interdependent model of self, an interdependent model of competence assumes that

individuals should be responsive to the social context, show deference to authority, rely on and

support others, and be part of the group. Thus, when Bronson and her restaurant coworkers

engage in such behaviors, they are enacting an interdependent model of competence and will be

seen as competent in the eyes of other working-class individuals. Yet, from the perspective of

her middle-class colleagues or students, their ways of being competent would go unseen or be

devalued.

The Institutionalization of Independent Models of Competence

In this section, we document how an independent model of competence is often taken for

granted as the only good or "right" way to be competent in two critical gateways institutions:

schools and workplaces (Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012). Although an independent model organizes

American institutions ranging from the media to politics (e.g., Adams, Biernat, Branscombe,

Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008; Bellah, 1985; Iyengar, 2010; Markus & Conner, 2013), we focus

on schools and workplaces because they play a crucial role in providing access to valued life

opportunities (e.g., access to influential social networks) and upward social mobility. The ideas,

practices, and standards of evaluation prevalent in these crucial institutions are not neutral; rather, they reflect an independent model of how to be a competent student or employee.

In higher education, colleges and universities are built according to an independent model of competence. In a survey of administrators at a diverse range of research universities and liberal arts colleges, we found that the vast majority reported that their institutions expect students to enact an independent model of competence—to pave their own paths, to challenge norms and rules, to express their personal preferences, and to work independently (Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012b; Fryberg & Markus, 2007). Indeed, institutions of higher education in American society tends to focus on the importance of exploring and developing personal interests and offers students the opportunity to structure their coursework and activities in a way that aligns with their preferences. Thus, an independent model of competence guides administrators' and educators' assumptions about how students should be motivated, learn, and interact with peers and professors. By setting up particular expectations about how good students should behave, an independent model serves as the standard against which students' behavior is interpreted and evaluated.

Universities tend to promote this standard by providing students with educational experiences that encourage and reward the development of specialized skills and patterns of behavior (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1982). In many university classrooms, for example, class participation is a significant part of students' final grades and also contributes to how professors evaluate students' performance and their potential more generally. This widespread practice reveals how an independent model of competence—in this case, the act of expressing one's own thoughts, ideas, and opinions—is institutionalized in American higher education as part of what it means to be a good or competent student (cf., Kim, 2002).

The standard is not only communicated by interactions inside the classroom with peers or with professors, but also by the messages contained in cultural products such as university guidebooks, brochures, or application materials. For example, in the advice to candidates provided on Yale University's website, the admissions committee advises applicants to, "pursue what you love and tell us about that. Be yourself." Dartmouth College's site stresses that, "What will impress us is YOU. You, letting your application express some aspect of your own story. You've established a great track record. Let your application clearly reflect your interests and motivation." The advice that these universities offer to applicants is guided by the assumption that "qualified" or "competent" students will be those who have the skills to identify and communicate their personal interests—behaviors that are socialized largely in middle-class contexts. By contrast, the competencies fostered by many working-class contexts (e.g., working together) are largely absent from these university materials.

Like the gateway institution of higher education, middle-class, professional workplaces, which could provide a path to upward mobility in American society for working-class individuals, are guided by an independent model of competence. Managers and other employees in professional firms tend to value employees who take charge and influence the situation, confidently express their ideas and opinions, and promote themselves (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012; Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Kennedy, Anderson, & Moore, 2013; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir, & Stamkou, 2011). These types of professional workplace settings often focus on the importance of personal autonomy and offer employees the opportunity to craft their jobs—i.e., to shape their job in a way that aligns with their individual needs and interests (Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For example, an employee at Morgan Stanley (an investment

bank) described the type of person who would be effective in their company, saying that "This is a great environment for the self-starter, someone who relishes a lot of autonomy, and seeks to do things the way they think is best. If you have initiative, you can take it and run. The firm will support that and reward that quality." This independent model of competence also guides managers' assumptions about how employees should be motivated, develop skills, and interact with colleagues. By setting up particular expectations about how good employees should behave, an independent model serves as the standard against which employees' behavior is interpreted and evaluated.

Workplaces tend to promote this standard by providing workers with experiences that encourage and reward the independent competencies they seek to cultivate (Bacon & Storey, 1996; Cooke & Rousseau 1988; Friedlander, 1965; Hyman, 1994; Lamont, 2000; Urtasun & Nunéz, 2012). Even before individuals join an organization, managers and employees expect job applicants to enact an independent model of competence: to ask questions, to express their preferences, and to take risks. Then, once they are hired, these expectations of independence are reinforced further. For example, at Amazon, all team members are ranked annually and those at the bottom are eliminated (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). Reflecting an independent model of competence, this system encourages all employees to focus primarily on their own individual performance, rather than on the needs of their team or the organization, and to try to outperform one another. Not surprisingly, practices that produce cutthroat competition among individuals are unlikely to develop the types of interdependent competencies that are beneficial in many workplaces—working together for the good of one's team or project, or mentoring and supporting one's colleagues.

This independent standard can also be conveyed through cultural products such as company websites or by recruiting and hiring practices. Company websites, for example, are saturated with messages communicating that independence is a requirement to be considered a "competent" applicant or an employee likely to be successful in the future. The recruiting homepage of Deloitte states: "What's great about the people? […] Each person is unique and valued for that, among the best and brightest in the business, and takes pride in his or her achievements." Similarly, on Goldman Sachs's website, an employee declares that managers "pride themselves on empowering their employees to be creative and to develop solutions to problems at any level." The employee then goes on to say that, "This is a place where I can select the opportunities I'm interested in, instead of waiting for the organization to decide for me." In both of these examples, the organizations portray a "competent" employee as one who has the skills to be stand out from others, showcase their personal achievements, and take charge of their workplace experience by making decisions. By contrast, an interdependent model of competence is largely absent from these messages.

Reliance on an Independent Model of Competence Disadvantages Working-Class Americans

Schools' and workplaces' reliance on an independent model of competence can reduce upward mobility and perpetuate social class inequality by creating a cultural mismatch for working-class individuals, who are more often guided by an interdependent model of competence (Stephens et al., 2014). The exclusion of interdependent models of competence can inadvertently signal to working-class individuals that gateway institutions are not places for

people "like them." This perceived lack of fit can, in turn, undermine working-class individuals'

opportunity to succeed in those settings.

In the section that follows, we suggest that working-class individuals experience a

cultural mismatch in these gateway institutions in three important domains: (1) *access,* (2)

performance, and (3) *evaluation*. The disadvantages produced in each of these settings can build

on one another and create a cycle that perpetuates inequality.

Access

The experience of cultural mismatch may make individuals from working-class

backgrounds less interested in or motivated to take the actions needed to gain access (e.g., apply)

to gateway institutions. This mismatch could produce these consequences by leading working-

class individuals to (1) be less likely to recognize the potential contributions of their own skills to

gateway institutions, and (2) feel like they are not welcome or do not fit in these settings. Both of

these experiences could lead people to conclude that they are unlikely to be admitted if they

apply, and that even if they were admitted, they are unlikely to do well or enjoy the experience.

Lack of recognition of potential contribution. A cultural mismatch could demotivate

working-class individuals from gaining access to gateway institutions because these institutions

signal that their interdependent competencies are unlikely to be effective there. In the context of

higher education, if working-class high school students do not see their models of competence

included in the college setting, they may infer that they do not have the skills necessary to

succeed. For example, they could get this impression from perusing college websites that

describe the "type" of (middle-class) student who is likely to be admitted (e.g., one who "has

pride in individual accomplishments"). Similarly, in the context of the workplace, if successful

college graduates from working-class backgrounds do not see their models of competence

included, they may conclude that they do not have the skills to pursue a position in a given

company. Notably, the most lucrative, high status workplaces are those that are most likely to

reflect and promote an independent model of competence (Acker, 2006; Sutton & Hargadon,

1996; Williams, 2012; Wojcicki, 2011).

   Anticipated lack of fit. A cultural mismatch could also demotivate working-class

individuals from gaining access to gateway institutions by leading them to believe that people

"like them" are unlikely fit in the setting. Highlighting the relevance of this concern in higher

education, Michael Gove, the UK's Education Secretary, notes that, "worries about 'not fitting

in' will be one reason why highly able children from less well-off backgrounds are less likely to

apply to the most selective universities" (Graham, 2014). These concerns about not being

welcome persist beyond college and can impact people's interest or lack thereof in various

occupations. Rather than exert significant effort to gain admission into certain high status or

lucrative occupations, working-class individuals may instead choose to withdraw from "the

game" (cf., Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). These individuals may feel that there is no point to

applying if they imagine that they will never truly belong.

Performance

   Even among working-class individuals who defy the odds and gain access to higher

education and white-collar workplaces, a cultural mismatch can further undermine their

performance in these settings. As we explain below, this mismatch may undermine working-

class individuals' performance in two ways: they may (1) be less effective enacting the skills

associated with an independent model and (2) lack a sense of comfort and fit in the setting.

   Less experience enacting an independent model of competence. A cultural mismatch

can undermine working-class individuals' performance by encouraging them to enact an

independent model of competence with which they are likely to have less experience. Upon gaining entry to key gateway institutions, the prevalence of an independent model of competence likely communicates that enacting independent norms is the only "right" way to be competent. Working-class students tend to have less exposure to and experience with these cultural norms of independence. They also tend to have less know-how about the—often implicit—"rules of the game" for how to properly enact these independent norms (cf., Bourdieu, 1984; Ridgeway, 2014). Thus, for working-class students, it may be especially difficult to enact the cultural norms of independence and to do so in the "right" way. For example, many college students from working-class backgrounds report difficulty choosing a major, developing and expressing their own ideas in class, or planning out their schedules to manage multiple and often competing demands on their time (e.g., papers and exams). As one working-class student put it, "While my college had done an excellent job recruiting me, I had no road map for what I was supposed to do once I made it to campus…Aside from a check-in with my financial aid officer… I was mostly keeping to myself to hide the fact that I was a very special kind of lost" (Capó Crucet, 2015).

The experience of not knowing the "right" way to act often does not end at college graduation. Rather, the impact of one's social class background persists far beyond college, even for those individuals who have successfully navigated their way through college and into a middle-class profession (cf., Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2014). Consider the "outsider" experience of Della Mae Justice, a successful Kentucky lawyer who was raised in poverty in Appalachia. Reflecting on the difficulty she still experiences in middle-class settings, she explains, "My stomach's always in knots getting ready to go to a party, wondering if I'm wearing the right thing, if I'll know what to do. I'm always thinking: How does everybody else know that? How do they know how to act? Why do they all seem so at ease?" (Lewin, 2005).

Lack of fit. A cultural mismatch could also undermine working-class individuals'

performance by reducing their comfort and sense of fit with the setting. In the context of higher

education, if students feel that their ways of being competent are not valued by their college or

university, they are likely to experience less fit and question whether they can be successful there

(cf., Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007). These feelings of discomfort

can prevent students from performing up to their potential. For example, illustrating this process

in a laboratory experiment, we exposed working-class students to a welcome letter that framed

their university's expectations in terms of either independence (cultural mismatch) or

interdependence (cultural match) and examined the consequences for their experience and

performance (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012a). We found that the

independent framing reduced working-class students' academic comfort, as indexed by self-

reported difficulty of the task, compared with the interdependent framing. Furthermore, this

reduced comfort undermined their performance on academic tasks (e.g., anagrams). Moreover, in

a longitudinal study in which we followed students throughout their four years in college, we

found that the experience of cultural mismatch not only reduced working-class students' fit at the

beginning of college, but also reduced their sense of fit throughout college, all the way until

graduation (Phillips, Stephens, & Townsend, 2015). Their reduced fit, in turn, predicted lower

grades at the end of college. Together these studies suggest that one way a cultural mismatch can

undermine working-class students' performance is by detracting from their sense of fit.

Evaluation

Finally, even if individuals from working-class backgrounds gain access to and perform

well, they may be further disadvantaged by the process of evaluation. That is, middle-class

evaluators' reliance on an independent model of competence may make it difficult to recognize

the skills and potential contribution of working-class individuals, and they may therefore

evaluate them as incompetent (cf., Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). As we describe below, this

process may occur even when working-class individuals perform as well as their middle-class

counterparts on objective measures of performance.

　　　　When middle-class evaluators assess the competence and achievements of working-class

individuals, their assessments are likely to be guided by an independent model of competence.

Accordingly, when they observe people enact an independent model of competence (e.g., taking

charge), they are likely to value these behaviors and recognize them as competent. In contrast,

when they observe behaviors that deviate from an independent model and instead reflect an

interdependent model of competence (e.g., being socially responsive), they are likely to devalue

these behaviors and not recognize them as forms of competence (cf., Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012;

Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009). For example, colleges and universities

recognize students for independent research projects or studying abroad, but "don't recognize, in

the same way, if you work at the neighborhood 7-Eleven to support your family," Anthony

Marx, former president of Amherst College, notes (Leonhardt, 2011). Similarly, in a professional

work context such as law or banking, employees who enact interdependence (e.g., mentor their

colleagues or act as team players) may not have their contribution and skills recognized.

　　　　When evaluators fail to recognize the interdependent competencies common among

many working-class individuals, this may further bias their overall or holistic assessment of these

individuals' abilities and their future potential. For example, even when working-class students

perform as well as their middle-class counterparts on standard performance measures (e.g.,

exams), they may still be evaluated as less competent overall (e.g., on their final grade in a class;

cf., Darley & Gross, 1983). Likewise, in the workplace, working-class employees who enact

interdependence may generally appear less qualified for a promotion or for additional opportunities in the future compared with equally qualified employees who primarily enact independence (Stephens et al., 2014; see also Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014). Consistent with this suggestion, Rudman & Glick (1999) found that hypothetical job applicants who endorsed an interdependent orientation (e.g., helping others as a source of accomplishment) were evaluated more poorly and were seen as less hirable than those who endorsed an independent orientation (e.g., wanting to be in charge and make decisions).

In sum, cultural mismatch effects are likely to disadvantage working-class individuals in three important domains—access, performance, and evaluation—that fuel social class inequality and perpetuate a cycle of inequality.

Implications for Interventions Aimed at Reducing Social Class Inequality in Gateway Institutions

To overcome this cycle of inequality that disadvantages working-class individuals, interventions should focus on reducing the mismatch between the independent models of competence that are normative in gateway institutions and the interdependent models of competence that tend to guide the behavior of working-class individuals. Since the divergence in cultural norms at the individual and the institutional levels produces this mismatch, we propose interventions at each of these levels: (1) individual-level interventions that develop independent models of competence and (2) institutional-level interventions aimed at helping institutions to create a more inclusive culture of competence. By reducing the cultural mismatch in models of competence, both individual and institutional interventions should increase working-class individuals' sense of comfort and fit in gateway institutions and also empower them with the

skills needed to be successful (cf., Stephens, Markus, Brannon, & Nelson, 2015). While we focus

here on the importance of increasing fit and providing individuals with skills to better navigate

gateway institutions, these psychological changes will undoubtedly have a variety of other

downstream consequences for working-class individuals' opportunity to succeed. For example,

just as these interventions will encourage working-class individuals to recognize their own

potential contribution, so too will they enable evaluators to recognize and grant competence to

working-class individuals.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no interventions that perfectly address the

cultural mismatch in models of competence that individuals experience in gateway institutions.

However, there are several existing interventions that provide useful frameworks for the

development of such interventions. Below, we first describe examples of effective interventions

at the individual and institutional levels. Then, drawing upon the insights offered by these

interventions, we propose specific intervention strategies that could be harnessed to address the

mismatch in models of competence and thereby reduce social class inequality.

Individual-Level Interventions

Because working-class individuals are less familiar with and have less experience

enacting independent models of competence, interventions could be targeted to help working-

class individuals develop an independent model. Such efforts can equip students and employees

with the skills that they need to be successful in gateway institutions. At the same time, knowing

what the "right" skills are and how to enact them will foster a greater sense of fitting in and

belonging in gateway institutions. As described below, strategies to develop an independent

model could include raising awareness about how social class shapes models of competence and

helping working-class individuals to develop independent models of competence (e.g., by giving

them opportunities to practice these behaviors). *Difference-education* is one intervention

approach that could be adapted to include these intervention strategies (Stephens, Hamedani, &

Destin, 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015).

Example: The Difference-Education Approach. In an intervention conducted during

the college transition, incoming working-class and middle-class students attended a one-hour

student panel in which junior and senior students discussed the ways in which their social class

backgrounds could matter for the college experience. Specifically, they described the obstacles

they encountered, as well as the strengths and strategies they leveraged to be successful during

their time in college (see Stephens, et al., 2014). Afterward, intervention participants completed a

brief video testimonial that gave them the opportunity to internalize what they had learned at the

panel. At the end of the first year in college, working-class students who attended this panel

reported greater fit with their university. They also enacted more of the independent behaviors

(e.g., seeking out college resources) that were required to reach their academic potential. As a

result, they earned significantly better grades than working-class students who did not attend the

panel, effectively eliminating social class differences in end-of-year GPA. By highlighting how

social class background mattered for the college experience, the intervention increased working-

class students' awareness of the university's expectations of them and equipped them with the

strategies they needed to be effective in middle-class university settings.

Raising Awareness. As revealed in the difference-education intervention approach, one

viable strategy to develop independent models of competence among working-class individuals

is to focus on raising awareness. To address the mismatch in models of competence, upon

entering key gateway institutions, working-class individuals could first be made aware of how

social class influences models of competence. That is, they could benefit from learning that there

is more than one effective model of competence and that different social class contexts afford

different models. Because the independent model is often taken-for-granted, it may not be clear

to working-class individuals what assumptions are included as part of this model. To make these

"rules of the game" visible, individuals should talk openly about what is expected in schools and

workplaces and what is required to be successful. Efforts to raise working-class individuals'

awareness of this independent model of competence will not only increase their understanding of

the skills that they need to develop to succeed, but also will help them to feel a greater sense of

fit and inclusion in their schools and workplaces.

Both formal and informal channels could be utilized to increase awareness. For example,

college advisors could be trained to better understand the common needs of working-class

students and to provide these students with the structured mentoring that they need to become

more familiar with the "rules of the game." Advisors could also be trained to share insights about

the behaviors that are both expected and associated with achievement and future opportunities.

Alternatively, students could become more aware of the rules from their peers. For example,

upon entering college, working-class students could be paired up with liaisons or buddies who

have been trained to give students the inside story on what college is about and how to be

successful there. These liaisons could have both working-class and middle-class backgrounds.

Stanford University's First Generation Low Income Partnership (FLIP) program, for example,

pairs up current FLIP members with incoming students. The more advanced students mentor the

incoming students, answering questions and providing information. Similarly, in workplaces,

onboarding practices could be tailored to help people from working-class backgrounds better

understand what is expected of them. For example, at Clear Channel Communications, new hires

are paired with a "peer coach" who is available to answer questions before their official start

date. To make this resource helpful for working-class hires, these peer coaches could be trained

to help new hires understand the environment and culture of the company, and what types of

behaviors are rewarded and viewed as competent.

   Enacting Independent Models of Competence. As revealed in the difference-education

approach described above, another viable strategy to develop independent models of competence

is to help working-class individuals learn how to enact the strategies they need to be effective in

middle-class settings. Just as students in the difference-education intervention were provided

with the strategies that they needed to be successful at their university, future interventions

should go one step further: they could give working-class individuals an opportunity to practice

enacting the skills associated with independent models of competence. Doing so will not only

equip working-class students and employees with the skills needed to succeed in middle-class

settings, but also help them to become more comfortable with the independent model.

   To help working-class individuals practice enacting the independent model, workplaces

and schools could offer workshops or training sessions. These workshops could offer working-

class individuals an opportunity to enact the independent model and get feedback on their

performance. An example of this can be seen in One Goal, a college preparatory program that

employs role-playing exercises to provide students with opportunities to practice enacting

strategies that will help them be more effective in college. Such an experience could educate

students about how to enact independent models of competence, such as how to express an

opinion in class, talk to professors about possible research opportunities, or seek help from a

teaching assistant. Similarly, training programs in the workplace should provide opportunities to

practice enacting independent behaviors and to subsequently receive feedback. For example, in

their investigation of training assertiveness, Smith-Jentsch, Salas, and Baker (1996) found that

both practice and feedback were critical for enhancing actual assertive behavior. Thus, rather than simply giving working-class individuals written materials or lectures on desired behaviors, interventions should provide them with the opportunity to actually engage in and receive feedback on the independent behaviors they need to enact to be perceived as competent.

Institutional-Level Interventions

Because gateway institutions contribute to the mismatch by promoting the independent model of competence as the norm, interventions could also be targeted at an institutional level to create a more inclusive culture of competence. Doing so will increase working-class individuals sense of fit and inclusion in gateway institutions. At the same time, this more inclusive culture may also lead middle-class evaluators to more often recognize the interdependent behaviors enacted by working-class individuals as a form of competence. As described below, organizations can create a more inclusive culture by incentivizing interdependent behaviors and broadening their understandings of competence to include the interdependent models common among individuals from working-class backgrounds. One institutional-level intervention that could be tailored to accomplish this goal is the *relational design* approach (Grant et al., 2007).

Example: The Relational Design Approach. In this study, a university call center sought to improve employee persistence and job performance by changing the cultural norms for how organizations motivate employees. While call centers typically motivate their employees using an individual-focused perspective (e.g., setting individual goals to maximize donations), in this intervention, the call center gave employees a relational, prosocial reason for the work they were doing. Specifically, they offered employees the opportunity to interact in person with a student beneficiary of their fundraising calling efforts. Employees were called into a break room for a 10-minute session: first, employees read a letter from a student beneficiary about how

receiving the scholarship had made a difference in their life, and then the student beneficiary was

invited into the room to answer questions posed by the callers about the student's background

and future plans. Before being excused, supervisors remarked to the callers: "Remember this

when you're on the phone—this is someone you're supporting." One month later, callers in the

intervention condition spent significantly more time on the phone and raised more money than

individuals who did not have the chance to interact with a beneficiary in person. By focusing on

relational motives for work (e.g., working together), rather than purely individual-focused goals

(e.g., outperform one another), the intervention conveyed that the interdependent model of

competence would be respected and included in the workplace.

      Change Incentive Structure. As revealed in the relational design intervention approach,

one strategy to create a more inclusive organizational culture is to change the incentives that are

used to motivate students or employees. These incentives could be altered to encourage and

reward the interdependent behaviors (e.g., working together, helping others) that are often

productive in schools or workplaces.[2] Traditional incentive approaches provide rewards at an

individual level (e.g., a bonus for individual performance). As was the case in the Amazon

example mentioned earlier, these individual-level incentives tend to promote individual-focused

behaviors and encourage people to focus exclusively on their own interests.

      However, there are other approaches to incentives that could be altered to communicate

the importance of the behaviors linked to an interdependent model of competence. For example,

in the restaurant industry, there are two prevalent models of tip distribution amongst wait staff:

(1) the typical individual approach in which each individual keeps all the tips that he or she earns

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[2] Even though the middle-class ways of displaying competence is often represented as the only way to get ahead, there are other important skills that are part of interdependent models of competence, such as working together and adjusting to others, that have potential to contribute to and improve performance. For example, workplaces such as elite consulting firms often expect and reward independent behaviors (e.g., taking charge) even though effective teamwork is often critical to meeting the clients' needs and benefitting the organization in the long run.

each shift or (2) a team-based approach in which all tips earned by all staff on a given night are pooled and distributed evenly amongst all individuals who worked that day. Since outcomes are jointly determined in the team-based approach, it encourages wait staff to work together as a team and to rely on and support one another to focus on the shared goal of increasing customers' experience and satisfaction. By incentivizing employees at a team level, this approach signals that interdependent models of competence are valued and included. This message should thereby increase working-class individuals' sense of fit with the setting.

      Changing Evaluation Standards to Include Interdependence. As revealed in the relational design approach described above, another strategy to create a more inclusive organizational culture is to change the evaluation process so that the criteria are more inclusive of interdependence. In many United States organizations today, for instance, interviewers do not have clear standards for evaluating abstract qualities like "motivation" or "ability." Instead, they often draw heavily from their own personal experiences to determine who is likely to be the "best" hire (Rivera, 2012). The largely middle-class evaluators of gateway institutions naturally draw from an independent model of what it means to be competent to make these judgments. Thus, as we describe below, including more specific and interdependent indicators of competence can counteract the inclination to rely exclusively on the independent model of competence.

      This practice could be implemented both when deciding whom to admit or hire and when evaluating current students and employees. Instead of simply asking vague questions such as "How competent is this individual?" evaluations could include specific behaviors that reflect not only independent but also interdependent ways of being competent. For example, in addition to asking "How effective is this individual at taking charge of projects?" they could also ask, "How

skilled is this individual at collaborating with others?" or "How effective is this employee at

supporting other employees?" Indeed, research suggests that instituting more formal policies

(e.g., creating standardized, specific criteria for evaluation) can reduce bias in important

decisions in the context of organizations' hiring (Reskin & McBrier, 2000) and compensation

(Elvira & Graham, 2002). By evaluating individuals in a way that acknowledges the value of

interdependence, this strategy should communicate to students or employees that they are likely

to fit and perform well in these gateway settings. Additionally, these changes are likely to enable

middle-class evaluators to more fully recognize the talents and full range of skills of their future

students or employees from both working- and middle-class backgrounds.

In sum, interventions that help working-class individuals to develop independent models

of competence and create more inclusive cultures should increase working-class individuals'

comfort and fit in these institutions and equip them with the skills necessary to better navigate

these settings.

Summary and Conclusion

The American Dream stresses that any individual who wants to work hard in pursuit of a

better life can succeed in doing so by effectively navigating through school and the workplace.

And yet, as we document throughout this chapter, these gateway institutions have, "become a

powerful force for reinforcing advantage and passing it on through generations" (Pérez-Peña,

2014). In particular, these institutions produce this intergenerational inequality by relying

primarily on independent models of competence, while excluding the interdependent models of

competence more common among the working-class. As described above, this cultural mismatch

in models of competence can disadvantage working-class Americans and perpetuate inequality in

three key ways that can build upon and reinforce one other. First, a mismatch can reduce working-class Americans' motivation to gain access to these settings. Second, among the working-class individuals who defy the odds and gain access to higher education or professional workplaces, a cultural mismatch can hinder their ability to perform up to their potential in these settings. And, third, a cultural mismatch can make it more difficult for evaluators (e.g., admissions officers, HR professionals) to recognize the competence of working-class individuals (e.g., their ability to work together).

Changes in mainstream society's definitions and evaluations of competence will not happen overnight, but both individuals and institutions can take concrete steps to reduce the cultural mismatch in models of competence that fuels inequality. As described above, future interventions should specifically aim to help working-class individuals better understand and learn to enact the independent models of competence that institutions frequently take for granted. At the same time, they can expand institutional definitions of competence to include interdependence. In so doing, they can create a more comfortable and welcoming environment in which working-class individuals will be more likely to thrive. By changing the ways in which institutions define and evaluate competence (e.g., by including interdependent models), perhaps mainstream American society will become more open to the possibility that different contexts require different behaviors to be effective, and thus recognize there is not just one "right" way to be competent. Guided by this insight, perhaps Bronson and her working-class colleagues will no longer experience a sense of shame for being seen as incompetent in the eyes of others and instead begin to feel valued for their contribution—both in working-class settings and beyond.

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