Social-Class Disparities in Higher Education and Professional Workplaces: The Role of Cultural Mismatch

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Abstract

Differences in structural resources and individual skills contribute to social-class disparities in both U.S. gateway institutions of higher education and professional workplaces. People from working-class contexts also experience cultural barriers that maintain these disparities. In this article, we focus on one critical cultural barrier—the cultural mismatch between (a) the independent cultural norms prevalent in middle-class contexts and U.S. institutions and (b) the interdependent norms common in working-class contexts. In particular, we explain how cultural mismatch can fuel social-class disparities in higher education and professional workplaces. First, we explain how different social-class contexts tend to reflect and foster different cultural models of self. Second, we outline how higher education and professional workplaces often prioritize independence as the cultural ideal. Finally, we describe two key sites of cultural mismatch—norms for understanding the self and interacting with others—and explain their consequences for working-class people's access to and performance in gateway institutions.

One of the hallmarks of U.S. society is the promise of the American dream—the idea that with enough hard work, everyone will have an opportunity to succeed, irrespective of social-class background. Yet social-science research finds that individuals' social-class backgrounds impact their access to and performance in the key gateway institutions that would promote upward social mobility: higher education and professional workplaces (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Indeed, compared with their peers from middle-class contexts,[1] students from working-class contexts gain access to higher education at far lower rates (Bailey & Dynarski, 2011) and after gaining admission, receive lower grade point averages and more often drop out (Sirin, 2005). Likewise, after college graduation, students from working-class contexts less often gain access to high-status occupations (Rivera, 2012; Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016), and when they do, they confront a persistent "class pay gap" (Laurison & Friedman, 2016).

Importantly, in these gateway institutions, both structural and individual factors fuel social-class disparities. In higher education, students from working- compared with middle-class contexts often attend lower quality high schools and, as a result, may develop fewer academic skills (e.g., advanced math) in critical areas that would help them gain access to and perform well in college (Crook & Evans, 2014). Likewise, after enrolling in college, they less often have the material and social resources that would enable them to obtain the unpaid, high-status internships that lead to elite job opportunities (Rivera & Tilcsik, 2016). Beyond differences in structural resources and individual skills, people from working-class contexts also experience cultural barriers that maintain social-class disparities. We focus here on one critical cultural barrier—the cultural mismatch between the independent norms prevalent in middle-class contexts and U.S. institutions and the interdependent norms common in working-class contexts.

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The current article provides an overview of how cultural mismatch can fuel social-class disparities in the gateway institutions of higher education and professional workplaces. First, we explain how different social-class contexts in the United States tend to reflect and foster different cultural models of self, or culture-specific understandings of what it means to be a good or appropriate person in the world (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). Second, we outline how U.S. gateway institutions often prioritize independence as the cultural ideal. Finally, we describe two key sites of mismatch—norms for understanding the self and norms for interacting with others—and outline their consequences for working-class people's access to and performance in gateway institutions.

Social-Class Contexts Shape Cultural Models of Self

Understanding how social class shapes cultural models of self requires an analysis of available material (e.g., income) and social resources (e.g., relationships). These conditions shape models of self by informing how people are able to think, feel, and act in the world as well as the ways of being that are most likely to be effective and become normative and preferred. Research conducted in a variety of cultural contexts has identified two common models of self that guide people's norms for understanding themselves and interacting with others (Markus & Kitayama, 2010). The *independent* model of self assumes that a normatively appropriate person should influence the context, be separate from other people, and act freely on the basis of personal motives, goals, and preferences. In contrast, the *interdependent* model of self assumes that the normatively appropriate person should adjust to the conditions of the context, be connected to others, and respond to the needs of others. Importantly, these models of self are not mutually exclusive: People from different social-class contexts have access to both independent and interdependent models. However, depending on people's chronic experiences, including their experiences in different social-class contexts, one model tends to become more highly elaborated and guide behavior.

Working-class contexts in the United States tend to afford an interdependent model of self. They foster interdependence because they provide fewer financial resources, greater environmental constraints, lower power and status, and fewer opportunities for choice, influence, and control than middle-class contexts (Kraus, Piff, Mendoza-Denton, Rheinschmidt, & Keltner, 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). To be effective in these contexts, people often develop and enact interdependent models of self: They must learn to adjust to others and the social context, show awareness of their position in the social hierarchy, and rely on and work together with others for material assistance and support (Lareau, 2003).

In contrast, middle-class contexts in the United States tend to promote an independent model of self. They foster independence because they provide greater access to economic capital, fewer environmental constraints, higher power and status, and greater opportunities for choice, influence, and control than do working-class contexts (Kraus et al., 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). To be effective in these contexts, people often develop and enact independent models of self: They must learn to influence others and the social context, challenge the status quo, and develop and express their own personal interests.

U.S. Gateway Institutions Prioritize Independence as the Cultural Ideal

Although both independent and interdependent models of self can be highly functional and adaptive, U.S. gateway institutions tend to prioritize independence as the cultural ideal (e.g., Markus & Conner, 2013). In higher education, an independent model of self often guides administrators' and educators' assumptions about how students should be motivated, learn, and interact with others (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). A survey of administrators revealed that a majority characterize their university cultures as independent: Students are expected to pave their own paths, challenge norms and rules, and express their personal preferences (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012). For example, class participation—namely, expressing one's own thoughts and ideas—is often a key component of students' grades (Kim, 2002).

Although we suggest that an independent model of self also tends to guide managers' and coworkers' assumptions about how employees should be motivated and behave in professional organizations, future research is needed to examine this question more directly. Though professional workplaces are increasingly recognizing the potential competitive advantage that collaboration may offer (Cross, Rebele, & Grant, 2016), these organizations still tend to expect employees to take charge and influence the situation, display autonomy, and confidently express their ideas (e.g., Kennedy, Anderson, & Moore, 2013). For example, at the time we conducted our research, the website of the investment bank Morgan Stanley emphasized 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" (Stephens, Dittmann, & Townsend, 2017, p. 516).

Sites of Cultural Mismatch

Institutions that prioritize independence can create a cultural mismatch for people from working-class contexts, who are often guided by a relatively interdependent model of self (Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). This mismatch can emerge when people from working-class contexts do not enact independent norms valued by institutions or when they do enact interdependent norms that are relatively less valued. In this section, we provide an overview of two key sites of cultural mismatch. Specifically, because models of self powerfully shape norms for understanding the self and norms for interacting with others, we focus on how cultural mismatch can arise in these two sites.

Understanding the self

Institutions expect students and employees to understand and present themselves in an independent manner—to showcase a highly positive view of the self and project confidence (Markus & Conner, 2013). Yet people from working-class contexts less often understand and present themselves in line with this independent cultural ideal (Kraus et al., 2012). People in working- compared with middle-class contexts report less positive self-regard, lower levels of self-esteem and confidence, and fewer self-oriented positive emotions (Kraus & Park, 2014; Piff & Moskowitz, 2018; Twenge & Campbell, 2002). For example, Varnum (2015) found that people in working- compared with middle-class contexts were less likely to think they were above average on a range of skills, abilities, and attributes. In another investigation, Grossmann and Varnum (2011) found that people in working- compared with middle-class contexts represented themselves as closer in size to their friends, showing less self-inflation. Importantly, we do not mean to suggest that people from working-class contexts have more negative self-views; rather, they express self-esteem, confidence, and positive emotions in an interdependent fashion. Indeed, in working-class contexts, interdependent understandings of the self, focusing on solidarity, loyalty, and connection to close others, often take precedence (Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004).

Reflecting these different understandings, people in working- compared with middle-class contexts less often present themselves as confident, distinguish themselves from others, and seek to stand out. Instead, they more often present themselves as humble, showcase similarity and connection to others, and seek to be part of groups (Stephens et al., 2007; see also, Na, McDonough, Chan, & Park, 2016). For example, Kraus and Keltner (2009) found that observers rated people from working- compared with middle-class contexts as displaying more engagement cues in their social interactions (e.g., more head nods and gazes toward their interaction partner), highlighting an increased tendency to present themselves as relational and connected. In another study, Stephens and colleagues (2007) presented participants with a vignette in which a close friend purchased the exact same car as the participant, highlighting the similarity of their choices. Middle-class master-of-business-administration students more often viewed this decision as a threat to their preference for presenting themselves as unique. In contrast, working-class firefighters more often felt affirmed by this decision because it aligned with their preference for presenting themselves as similar to others, often exclaiming, "We should start a car club!" (p. 822).

Interacting with others

Institutions also expect people to interact with others in an independent style—by using relationships for personal gain, promoting their own interests, and advocating for themselves (Grant & Ashford, 2008). Yet people from working-class contexts are less likely both to understand relationships in this way and to be guided by this independent style of enacting relationships (Belmi & Laurin, 2016). For example, Carey and Markus (2017) show that whereas people in middle-class contexts often view relationships as an individual choice (e.g., connections can be severed if they are not beneficial), people in working-class contexts often reject this self-interested understanding of relationships and instead view relationships as an enduring part of who they are. Indeed, in working-class contexts, in which people are often guided by an interdependent style of interpersonal interaction, using relationships solely for personal gain would be seen as distasteful or inauthentic (Williams, 2017).

Reflecting these different understandings of relationships, people in working- compared with middle-class contexts less often use relationships to advance personal interests and instead more often focus on, attend to, and defer to others' needs (Dietze & Knowles, 2016; Markus & Conner, 2013). In many working-class contexts, interdependent norms such as deference to authority figures often take precedence over self-promotion or self-advocacy. For example, ethnographic studies find that parents in working- compared with middle-class contexts less often seek to influence authority figures such as teachers or doctors to promote their children's own self-interest (Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau, 2003). Similarly, Calarco (2011) found that elementary school children from working- compared with middle-class contexts are less likely to advocate for themselves (i.e., proactively seek help) with teachers.

Consequences of Cultural Mismatch in Higher Education and Professional Workplaces

On the path to upward mobility, these sites of cultural mismatch—higher education and professional workplaces—can have important consequences for people from working-class contexts, both in terms of gaining access to and performing up to their potential in gateway institutions.

Gaining access

The experience of cultural mismatch can lead people from working-class contexts to feel less comfortable enacting the independent behaviors that are required to gain access to gateway institutions, and this divergence can also lead educators or managers to evaluate them less positively.

People from working- compared with middle-class contexts are less likely to feel comfortable enacting the independent behaviors required to gain access to gateway institutions. Even the most high-achieving students from working-class contexts are unlikely to apply to selective universities (Hoxby & Avery, 2012), in part because they are often uncomfortable separating themselves from their families or communities (Covarrubias & Fryberg, 2015). Further reflecting this discomfort enacting the independent behaviors required to gain access to institutions, Belmi and Laurin (2016) found that people from working- compared with middle-class contexts are more reluctant to pursue paths to organizational power when doing so requires self-interested behavior (e.g., using connections for self-gain).

Research also suggests that when students or employees diverge from institutions' cultural norms, evaluators tend to view them less positively and are less likely to admit them (Bencharit et al., 2018; Rivera, 2012). Given that the cultural ideal is typically to recruit students and employees who more often enact independent norms (Stephens et al., 2017), college recruiters and hiring managers should therefore be less likely to admit or hire people who diverge from this cultural ideal (Rivera, 2012). For example, evaluators should respond less positively to students or employees who do not present themselves with confidence or positive self-regard or who do not effectively advocate for themselves. Supporting this suggestion, people rate job applicants who have independent (i.e., agentic) skills as more competent and are more likely to hire them, compared with applicants who have more interdependent (i.e., communal) skills (Rudman & Glick, 1999; see also Bencharit et al., 2018).

Performance

Even when students and employees from working-class contexts defy the odds and gain admission to higher education or professional workplaces, they still confront a cultural mismatch that can undermine their opportunity to succeed. Specifically, experiencing mismatch can inhibit their performance by reducing their comfort in these settings, leading educators and managers to evaluate them less positively.

When people do not see their cultural norms included in institutions, they tend to feel uncomfortable and less often perform up to their potential (Brannon, Markus, & Taylor, 2015; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). For example, when university welcome messages frame the culture as independent (e.g., expecting "bold students who assert their own ideas"), students from working-class contexts experience tasks as more difficult, show higher levels of stress, and perform less well compared with when universities frame the culture as interdependent (e.g., expecting students to be part of a community; Stephens, Fryberg, et al., 2012; Stephens, Townsend, et al., 2012). These negative performance consequences of cultural mismatch can persist from college entry to college graduation 4 years later (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau, 2018).

Moreover, when people from working- compared with middle-class contexts less often display valued independent behaviors (e.g., confidence) and more often display devalued interdependent behaviors (e.g., humility), their performance is likely to be evaluated less positively. For example, when people present themselves in an independent way by displaying confidence, observers often mistake their confidence for competence or skill and offer them significant advantages (e.g., status attainment, performance evaluations; Bencharit et al., 2018; Kennedy et al., 2013). In addition, people who enact an independent style of interpersonal interaction—for example, by advocating for their own interests—are better able to gain access to valuable resources and opportunities for advancement (e.g., better grades, promotions; Grant & Ashford, 2008; Lareau, 2003).

Conclusion

Despite U.S. society's unwavering belief in the American dream, many gateway institutions fail to achieve this ideal. One reason for this failure is that institutions are not neutral but instead organized by taken-for-granted middle-class norms about how to be an appropriate person. The divergence between the independent cultural ideals that frequently pervade these institutions and the interdependent norms common in working-class

contexts can create sites of cultural mismatch in norms for understanding the self and norms for interacting with others. Experiencing mismatch can produce discomfort for people from working-class contexts and lead educators or managers to evaluate them less positively. People from working-class contexts may therefore be less likely to gain access to and perform up to their potential in these gateway institutions.

Although cultural mismatch plays an important role in fueling inequality, it can be reduced (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Townsend, Stephens, Smallets, & Hamedani, 2018). Just as individuals have the capacity to learn new cultural norms, so too do institutions have the capacity to integrate more diverse norms into the ideas and practices that make up their cultures. Indeed, recent research supports the idea that professional workplaces in the United States are increasingly recognizing the value of collaboration (Cross et al., 2016). When institutions diversify their cultures in this way, they should be able to reduce the experience of cultural mismatch for people from working-class contexts and instead provide a more inclusive experience in which a broader range of students or employees can thrive. In doing so, these institutions will be one step closer to serving as engines of social mobility.

Recommended Reading

Kraus, M. W., Piff, P. K., Mendoza-Denton, R., Rheinschmidt, M. L., & Keltner, D. (2012). (See References). Theoretical review outlining ways in which individuals' differing material conditions and perceptions of rank, compared with those of people from different social classes, influence their psychological experiences and behavior.

Rivera, L. A. (2012). (See References). Research documenting how applicants' perceived cultural fit with the culture of elite professional firms influences hiring decisions and how perceived cultural fit varies as a function of applicants' social-class backgrounds.

Stephens, N. M., Fryberg, S. A., Markus, H. R., Johnson, C. S., & Covarrubias, R. (2012). (See References). Research documenting how universities' prioritization of independence as the cultural ideal undermines fit and performance of students from working- compared with middle-class backgrounds and the role that this unseen disadvantage has in the production and maintenance of inequality.

Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Fryberg, S. A. (2012). (See References). Theoretical review that explains how social-class disparities in the domains of both health and education can arise not just from individual or structural factors but also from the mutual constitution of individuals and structures, namely, the sociocultural self.

Stephens, N. M., Markus, H. R., & Phillips, L. T. (2014). (See References). Theoretical review that outlines how American gateway institutions tend to prioritize independence as the cultural ideal, which in turn tends to create mismatches for people from working- compared

with middle-class contexts in these institutions, and how this resulting social-class culture cycle creates and fuels inequality.

Action Editor

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Note

1. By the term *working-class contexts*, we refer to contexts in which most people do not have 4-year college degrees and have relatively low incomes or relatively low-status occupations. In contrast, by *middle-class contexts*, we refer to contexts in which most people have 4-year college degrees, relatively high incomes, or relatively high-status occupations.

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