

# Cultural models of self and social class disparities at organizational gateways and pathways

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Attaining a college degree has traditionally been assumed to be key to upward social and professional mobility. However, college graduates from working-class backgrounds achieve less career success in professional, white-collar workplaces compared to those from middle-class backgrounds. Using a cultural models approach, we examine how the independent cultural beliefs and practices promoted by professional organizations disadvantage people from working-class backgrounds, who espouse interdependent beliefs and practices. Our review illustrates how this disadvantage can manifest in two ways. First, despite relative equality in objective qualifications, it can occur at organizational gateways (e.g., interview and hiring decisions). Second, even after people from working-class backgrounds gain access to an organization, it can occur along organizational pathways (e.g., performance evaluations and assignment to high-profile tasks).

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Attaining a college degree has traditionally been assumed to be key to upward social and professional mobility in the United States. However, college graduates must also be able to leverage their degrees for career success. Unfortunately, when people from working-class backgrounds are hired into professional workplaces, they are likely to be less successful than their middle-class counterparts (e.g., they are paid lower salaries; [1,2]). In the current review, we examine social class differences in career outcomes and experiences by taking a cultural models approach (e.g., [3,4]). We draw on theoretical and empirical work on social class and cultural models of self. This work illuminates how the independent cultural beliefs and practices embodied in white-collar workplaces do not

match the interdependent cultural beliefs and practices espoused by people from working-class backgrounds and thereby disadvantage these individuals in professional organizations. Specifically, we consider how these cultural mismatches and the disadvantages associated with them can manifest at organizational gateways and along organizational pathways [5]. Organizational gateways are points of access; disadvantage means lacking a fair opportunity to gain access (e.g., when working-class applicants are not invited to interview despite sufficient qualifications). By contrast, organizational pathways are opportunities for achievement once people have gained access; disadvantage means lacking a fair opportunity to succeed or advance (e.g., when working-class employees are overlooked for promotions despite excellent performance records).

## Social class and cultural models of self

People's social class backgrounds shape what it means to be a 'good' person and what constitutes normatively 'good' behaviors and actions (i.e., cultural models of self; e.g., [3,4,6]). Due to variation in both material resources (e.g., income, access to high-quality education) and social resources (e.g., relationships with family and friends), middle-class and working-class contexts tend to promote different cultural models of self (e.g., [7,8,9]).<sup>1</sup> Specifically, people who grow up in middle-class contexts often have access to more material resources and face fewer risks and uncertainty compared to those who grow up in working-class contexts [10–12]. Specifically, people from middle-class backgrounds are subject to few environmental constraints and have ample opportunity to make choices and control their contexts. Over time, these ways of being foster an *independent model of self*, which emphasizes the individual self and promotes norms of confidence, decision-making based on unique personal preferences, and attempts to influence the situation to bring it into line with one's desires [13–17]. In contrast, people from working-class backgrounds face material and social conditions that often require that they adjust themselves to their contexts and rely on close others for support. Over

<sup>1</sup> We define being from a middle-class background as having grown up in a household where at least one parent or guardian held a 4-year college degree and where parents or guardians were likely to have had relatively prestigious occupations and high levels of income. We define being from a working-class background as having grown up in a household in which no parent or guardian held a 4-year college degree and where parents or guardians were likely to have had relatively low prestige occupations and low levels of income.

time, these ways of being foster an *interdependent model of self*, which emphasizes one's relationship to others and promotes norms of being tough and strong, adhering to rules and standards, and constraining one's behaviors during interactions with authority figures [18–22].

Independent and interdependent models are both valid ways of perceiving and acting in the world. However, institutions are often set up and operate primarily according to one model or the other. When individuals enter contexts that promote a model of self that differs from the one on which they rely, they experience a *cultural mismatch* (e.g., [23,24]). Given that workplaces are often set up according to the cultural model of self held by their founders and the majority of their members, professional or white-collar workplaces are likely to rely on independent models of self [25\*\*]. Although college affords students from working-class backgrounds opportunities to learn and practice some elements of an independent model, social class differences in models of self persist through graduation (Phillips *et al.*, unpublished). As a result, people from working-class backgrounds are likely to experience a cultural mismatch between the independent model prevalent in organizational settings and their interdependent model of self. As we discuss below, this cultural mismatch may lead people from working-class backgrounds to experience disadvantage at the organizational gateways and pathways required for career success.

### Cultural mismatch at organizational gateways

Given that the primary factors that determine passage through an organizational gateway are education, relevant professional experience, and personal contacts (e.g., referrals; [26]), objective social class differences in qualifications partially explain social class disparities at these points of access. Indeed, people from working-class backgrounds, compared to those from middle-class backgrounds, are less likely to attain 4-year college degrees, more likely to attend lower status colleges and universities, and more likely to lack valuable social networks and relevant professional experiences (e.g., internships; [27–30]). What we suggest here, however, is that even when controlling for objective factors such as education, contacts, and professional experience, a cultural mismatch will occur between organizations' and hiring managers' independent models of self and working-class job seekers' interdependent models. Specifically, we theorize that, due to the importance placed on cultural fit at organizational gateways, this mismatch will lead working-class applicants to be disadvantaged.

Perceived cultural fit between the applicant and the organization or the hiring manager is a major criterion in interview and hiring decisions [31–33]. Given that candidates typically hold similar objective qualifications in terms of education and experience, hiring managers assign substantial weight to the subjective fit criteria and

often use cultural fit as a formal evaluative criterion [34,35\*\*]. We theorize that the cultural mismatch between organizations' and hiring managers' independent models of self and working-class job seekers' interdependent models will disadvantage these applicants because they will be more likely to be perceived as lacking cultural fit. For example, confidence in decision-making, a characteristic more consistent with norms of independence than norms of interdependence [15,17], is often used during the resume selection and interview process to indicate fit and professional demeanor [36,37]. In addition, job applicants who possess independent (*i.e.*, agentic) skills are rated as more competent and more likely to be hired than applicants who present themselves as more interdependent (*i.e.*, communal; [38]). Illustrating this value, Deloitte's website encourages interviewees to 'be confident' and 'sell yourself,' advising: "Make sure you can speak confidently about any experiences you've had in the workplace and in the classroom . . . be sure to sell yourself by promoting your skills and abilities" (Deloitte Interview tips; URL: <https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/careers/articles/about-deloitte-careers-interview-tips.html>). Applicants from working-class backgrounds may be uncomfortable and inexperienced at displaying confidence and engaging in self-promotion, behaviors that are inconsistent with norms of interdependence.

Although not focused on cultural models of self *per se*, research in sociology on the influence of social-class in the hiring process has also demonstrated how cultural fit disadvantages applicants from working-class backgrounds. In a study using a sample of elite law firms, male applicants whose resumes signaled they were from higher class backgrounds (e.g., they had participated in extracurricular activities such as sailing) received more interview invitations than male applicants whose resumes signaled they were from lower class backgrounds (e.g., they had participated in extracurricular activities such as track and field; [39]). Focusing on this type of cultural fit (*i.e.*, alignment of applicants' extracurricular activities with White middle/upper-class culture) disadvantages applicants from working-class backgrounds who are less likely than applicants from middle-class backgrounds to have engaged in the requisite activities.

### Cultural mismatch along organizational pathways

Despite disadvantages at organizational gateways, some working-class applicants are able to beat the odds and gain employment in professional organizations. However, given that organizations tend to operate according to an independent model of self, the experience of cultural mismatch is likely to disadvantage employees from working-class backgrounds along organizational pathways [25\*\*,40\*\*]. Although social class disparities created by cultural mismatches have been explored in the context of

pathways in higher education (*e.g.*, [24,41]), little research in psychology examines how cultural mismatches shape social class outcomes in the workplace. We focus on the following three key factors that we theorize are likely to contribute to these mismatches in the workplace: personality and interaction styles, leveraging existing relationships, and building a broad network. Further, given the importance of these factors in promoting career success, we propose that cultural mismatches in these areas will hinder the success of employees from working-class, compared to middle-class, backgrounds.

### Personality and interaction styles

One predictor of career achievement emphasized in the management literature is possession of the ‘right’ personality characteristics, including, being proactive [42–44] and agentic [45,46]. In order for individuals to attain upward mobility in their organizations, it is important to challenge authority, exert influence, and use impression-management skills [43]. Another predictor of career achievement is engaging in the ‘right’ interaction styles. Employees are often rewarded for challenging the status quo as they attempt to promote positive organizational change [47], and for their use of political skill, interpersonal influence, and ingratiation in interactions with others [48]. Although employees from working-class backgrounds who make it through organizational gateways may possess a strong work ethic and the ability to adjust to or be gritty in the face of suboptimal circumstances, these desirable personality characteristics and interaction styles do not match the traits and behaviors that are most often rewarded in organizations (*e.g.*, [14,24]).

In turn, we theorize that employees from working-class backgrounds are disadvantaged along this organizational pathway by cultural mismatch in the following two ways. First, given the interdependent norms of respecting authority and complying with rules and norms, employees from working-class backgrounds may be less likely to challenge coworkers’ or managers’ ideas, or offer dissenting opinions, behaviors that are praised in most organizations [47]. Similarly, employees from working-class backgrounds may be less likely to possess the strong sense of personal mastery that is often critical in obtaining leadership positions [49]. Second, given the interdependent norms of being authentic and loyal, employees from working-class backgrounds may feel uncomfortable and inauthentic performing the self-serving interpersonal tactics rewarded in organizational pathways [50\*,51]. For example, when high power positions require disingenuous or calculating behaviors, people from working-class backgrounds report lower desire for those positions, compared to people from middle-class backgrounds [50\*].

### Leveraging existing relationships

One of the most crucial skills for upward career mobility is the ability to tap into existing relationships for

information and social capital [52,53]. For example, important pathway events, such as employee evaluations, are influenced by employees’ ability to leverage relationships, which calls for understanding others and influencing them for one’s own objectives [54,55]. Compared to the politically inept, employees who engage in ingratiation behaviors are rated by their supervisors as being more helpful, considerate, and cooperative in the workplace [56]. In turn, building rapport with one’s supervisor over time can improve one’s chances at attaining future promotions [57]. Importantly, these various methods of leveraging existing relationships are consistent with independent, but not interdependent, norms.

We theorize that employees from working-class backgrounds face cultural mismatches, and are, therefore, disadvantaged along this organizational pathway in two ways. First, the behaviors required for strategically leveraging existing relationships, particularly those with weak ties and authority figures (*e.g.*, bosses and managers), are mismatched with norms of interdependence. For example, people from working-class backgrounds are less likely than those from middle-class backgrounds to both seek help from authority figures and approach such individuals directly, when they do seek help [21,22]. Instead, people from working-class contexts are likely to turn to trusted, strong, and close relationships even in situations in which it would be most effective to turn to a broader and more dispersed network (*i.e.*, job loss; [58\*]). Second, given that managers are often from middle-class backgrounds, their models of self are likely to mismatch the models held by employees from working-class backgrounds. Such dissimilarity may decrease understanding, make these cross-class interactions difficult, and, ultimately, hamper employees’ career success by decreasing their ability to leverage these relationships. Indeed, research shows that career mentorship is less beneficial for the early career promotions of employees from working-class backgrounds than it is for their middle-class counterparts [59\*].

### Building a broad network

Finally, career success in professional organizations also requires the ability to cultivate and maintain a broad network [60,61] with weak ties [62]. In order to build and maintain this type of network, employees need to focus on increasing the number and diversity of their contacts, participate in networking events and social functions, and develop relationships with the ‘right’ people (*i.e.*, those who have the potential to benefit one’s career; [63]). Importantly, these behaviors, which treat others as resources and connections to be used for personal gain, are consistent with norms of independence, but do not match norms of interdependence.

We theorize that people from working-class backgrounds face a cultural mismatch along this organizational

pathway and are, therefore, disadvantaged. For example, forging relationships for the sake of building self-serving connections aligns closely with the independent norm of influencing others, but is less consistent with interdependent norms of responding to the needs, preferences, and interests of others [51]. As a result of this inconsistency and, perhaps, their low trust of others outside of their immediate social circle (*i.e.*, family and close friends; [64]), people from working-class backgrounds may feel uncomfortable engaging in networking behaviors. Consistent with this, people from working-class backgrounds are more likely than those from middle-class backgrounds to indicate that building weak ties makes them feel uncomfortable [50<sup>\*</sup>]. Unsurprisingly, relative to people from middle-class backgrounds, people from working-class backgrounds tend to have smaller networks that are denser and less diverse [7,65]. In addition, their strong ties may be less helpful for professional development than the strong ties held by people from middle-class backgrounds [66,67].

## Conclusion

The research reviewed supports the notion that people from working-class backgrounds face obstacles both at organizational gateways and along organizational pathways. Despite comparable qualifications, and even after gaining access, social class disparities persist due to a mismatch between the independent models of self valued in professional organizations and the interdependent models espoused by job applicants and employees from working-class backgrounds. Importantly, we do not mean to suggest that interdependent models of self are ineffective or inferior *per se*—they are a disadvantage only due to their mismatch with independent models that predominate professional organizations.

In order to maximize individual, group, and firm performance, it may be necessary for organizations to capitalize on valuable interdependent skills held by working-class employees (*e.g.*, high emotional intelligence; [68,69]) and encourage interdependent behaviors such as collaboration and working toward shared goals [70,71]. Consistent with the notion that interdependence can be beneficial, recent research suggests that leaders from working-class backgrounds (*i.e.*, whose parents had lower incomes) can be more effective than those from middle-class backgrounds in some organizational contexts (*i.e.*, the United States Army; [72]). Thus, as organizations seek routes to improved performance, they should leverage the benefits of interdependence by broadening the skillsets required for hiring and career advancement to include interdependent behaviors and explicitly educating applicants and employees from working-class backgrounds about the independent ‘rules of the game’ required to successfully pass through organizational gateways and pathways [73].

## Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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