A Tale of Two Psyches: 
Upper Class vs. Lower Class Psychology

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Summary of Talk

- The idea that mind is shaped by culture, and simultaneously shapes culture has become increasingly influential in psychology. Yet often conspicuously absent is an account of the rift in culture produced by class relations, the unique cultures of classes, and how this relates to psychology. Even Marxist psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who greatly illuminated the link between mind and cultural-historical activity, did not directly address the relationship between class and psychology. Vygotsky’s approach, however, may be a good foundation for integrating recent discoveries of substantial differences in the cognitive patterns and psychological tendencies of lower/working-class and middle/upper-class individuals. This presentation reviews and integrates these empirical findings, arguing they are the result of stark discrepancies in the daily activity, material conditions, and social interactions (culture) of working and upper class individuals. These findings indicate that while lower class individuals suffer heightened vigilance to threat and a reduced sense of personal control compared with upper class individuals, they develop a more communal sense of self and agency, and a more collective sense of self-esteem. On both psychological and physiological measures, working class individuals exhibit greater empathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior than their upper class counterparts. Working class individuals are also more likely to perceive social categories (race, gender, ethnicity) as socially constructed, while upper class individuals tend to view these categories as natural and unchangeable. Thus, while working class labor remains exploited by the capitalist class, the unique psychology engendered by working class life indicates potential for collective transformation of these social relations.
Psychological Inequality

• Class inequality plays a major role in shaping the psychology of individuals in those classes.

• We’ve know about class inequality in physical and mental health outcomes for a long time, but psychology hasn’t given it a great deal of attention.

  – **Consistent finding:** People in upper classes — those who have a good education, hold high-paying jobs, and live in comfortable neighborhoods — live longer and healthier lives (both physically and mentally) than do people in lower classes, many of whom are members of ethnic minorities.

• Interestingly, recent research suggests that there are many differences in the social-cognitive patterns of various classes as well!

• As remarkable as some of these studies are, there often seem to be incomplete and often simplistic theoretical explanations for these differences.

• A bit later we will attempt to offer a more helpful framework for thinking about these differences.
Just how unequal is US society?

• More than Americans think:
  – Richest 20% owns 85% of the wealth
  – Poorest 20% owns .1% of the wealth

• Since 1970’s: productivity of US workers increased, while hourly compensation flat
  – This benefits the 1% who own the corporations, rather than workers who produce the wealth
  – Since 2008 Great Recession: 95% of all economic growth has benefitted the 1%. Bottom 90% has lost wealth
  – CEO/worker pay ration of 273:1, + gender (77c) and race pay gaps

• US is 97th out of 137 countries in inequality, next to Bulgaria, Phillipines, & Cameroon
What are the health ramifications?

- For a host of reasons, including lack of access to health care and more stressful, polluted and dangerous living and work environments, LC and WC individuals have been found to be more susceptible to physical illness, and to have poorer short and long term health outcomes relative to those from the upper class (Adler et al., 1994; Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, & Prothrow-Stith, 1997; Wilkinson, 1999).

- Lower and working class people are also more likely to experience reduced life-satisfaction and “subjective well-being” [something like happiness to psychologists] (Diener & Suh, 1997; Howell & Howell, 2008), more intense and frequent negative mood states (e.g. dysphoric affect; Gallo & Matthews, 2003), for instance greater rates of depression.

- Poverty, or just thinking about financial problems, was found to negatively affect the cognitive skills (fluid intelligence, math) of LC individuals ($20,000 at low end), but not for those better off ($70,000) (Shafir et al., 2013 in Science), knocking 13 points off of their IQ – the “poverty tax.”

- Poverty leads to experiences of violence, family turmoil, crowded and low-quality housing, financial precarity, and lack of quality health care and education.

- Another longitudinal study shows how the effects of poverty accumulate across time – children poor at age 9 had greater amygdala activity and lower prefrontal cortex activity at age 24 during an experiment in which they were asked to manage their emotions while looking at a series of negative photos. These same brain patterns of “dysregulation” in dealing with stress and threats has been observed in people with PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders, and aggression.

- LCIs are also more likely to join the military, often for economic reasons, and therefore more likely to suffer PTSD and other mental & physical traumas of war.
The situation is fundamentally unjust, but there is hope for working people

- The emerging picture is one of very unequal psychological development
- Nevertheless, lower/working class individuals have a number of psychological strengths and “advantages” relative to our upper class counterparts
- These potentially equip us to challenge these disparities through collective action
How to interpret these psychological differences?

• **Social Cognitive Theory:** Social Cognitive Theory sees social class contexts as defined by two processes: 1) the objective experience of contrasting levels of material resources that define the individual’s social living, and 2) the individual’s construal of rank in comparison with others in the social class hierarchy (Adler et al., 2000 & Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2011). So far, okay. But as we’ll see the main overall class difference they postulate is:

  – **Solipsism:** the sense that one’s own internal states (e.g. traits, goals, emotions) are and should be a fundamental influence on thought and action.
  – **Contextualism:** A sense that one’s actions are chronically influenced by external forces outside of individual control and influence. These influences can be real, structural influences (social inequality, inadequate social services) or expectations of external influences (e.g. expectations for discrimination based on social class).

• **Dominant within the Social Cognitive approach to class:** a rather apolitical interpretation of these differences according to static “class contexts” (e.g. threatening environment vs. environment of wealth & opportunity), which result in general world views of “Solipsism” for upper class, and “Contextualism” for lower/working class.

• **It seems that a better overall explanation would be:** a dynamic mind/class analysis that focuses on the practical activity, conflicts, and political interests of various classes.

• **Broadly speaking, this is a Vygotskian (sociohistorical) approach to psychology, rooted in a Marxist analysis**
What are “classes?”

• For most psychologists, class is an aggregate of various SES measures (scale variable)
  – Income, wealth
  – Educational attainment
  – Status of profession

• A more dynamic analysis of class would be rooted in: Marx/Engels (1848) idea that class is essentially a social relationship between those who control the means of production (e.g. factories, businesses) and those who work within those means (including within schools and hospitals).

• This is the 99% vs. 1% in Occupy Parlance. A great slogan, though more of a scale variable and less specifically about the social relations of production than Marxism.

• This gives rise to starkly different daily activities, ways of life, access to politicians, etc. Politically, the Capitalist Class (RC) and WC have irreconcilably opposing interests, and awareness of such social stratification and conflict is referred to as “class consciousness.”
Psychological Difference #1

– One caveat is that many of these studies are conducted between WC & Middle Class, rather than the 1%/Capitalist class, who likely would show even greater psychological differences

1.) Lower class individuals (LC’s) are more vigilant to threat than UC’s

Social cognitive explanation (no analysis of exploitation): LC have increased vulnerability to violence, criminal injustice punishment, shorter life spans, increased depression and other disorders (Gallo, 2013), and greater social threats of ostracism and stigmatization. Threat detection system activated frequently, and becomes a basic feature of the LC social self.

– LC show elevated heart and blood pressure following ambiguously threatening social scenarios. Could partly explain higher rates of LC coronary heart disease. Increased amygdala activation in response to anger faces.

– LC children perceive greater threat and hostility in videos of ambiguously hostile interactions (Chen & Matthews, 2001). Adults report more chronic levels of cynical mistrust and hostility relative to UC.

– Stereotype threat (fear of confirmation): When academic tests are framed as diagnostic of ability/intelligence, students with parents with lower prestige occupations performed worse than when test was not diagnostic of ability.

– Downstream consequences: Chronic vigilance to threat is a predictor of poor health outcomes (e.g. Sapolsky, 2000, 2004).

– A potential lack of trust of government officials or political leaders (e.g. Tyler, Rasinski, & McGraw, 1985). [Social cognitive researchers see this as negative, but not Marxists!]
Psychological Difference #2

• 2.) LC’s will experienced a **reduced sense of personal control**, relative to UC’s.

• **The social-cognitive explanation:** In contrast to the vulnerability and external threats that pervade LC life, UCIs inhabit environments of enhanced wealth, personal freedom, elevated status, and social opportunities (Domhoff, 1998).
  • Associations have been documented between income and general perceptions of mastery, and also between higher subjective SES rank and a greater sense of personal control over life outcomes.
  • UCIs may actually believe that their votes will have greater impact than their LC counterparts, which could partly explain greater voter turnout among UCs (Krosnick, 1990).

• It is beneficial to health outcomes of UCI’s that they believe they can personally control and regulate their reactions to life’s stressors.

• However, **activism** has been found to be associated with improved physical health (older study), happiness, and mental well-being (Klar & Kasser, 2009), and people engaging in brief activism in an experiment reported feeling significantly more alive and energized after engaging in the activism than control participants who engaged in non-activist activity (writing to the cafeteria at the university about food options).
  • This effect may be partly because activism helps people gain a greater sense of personal/collective control over their social world. It has also been speculated that activism helps a person to build social connections, and is a meaningful life project to dedicate oneself to, which can have beneficial psychological effects as well.
Psychological Difference #3

3.) LC’s will develop more **communal self-concepts**, whereas UC’s develop more **personally agentic self-concepts**

Capitalist owners operate as free, unique individuals/businesses making executive choices and competing with each other. WC collaborates in work and daily life (child care, teamwork, relying on friends)

- In sum: LC self is defined by social connections to relationship partners, important social groups, and communities.
- UC self is defined by the choices one makes, the capacity to control life’s outcomes, and the extent to which one stands out from other individuals.

Observation & interview showed that WC parents stressed that their children blend into their elementary school environments, while MC parents were more likely to stress their children’s curiosity and independence (Weininger & Laureau, 2009).

LCIs were more likely to choose a pen that resembled the other pens, reflecting their communal orientations, while UCIs were more likely to choose a unique pen, reflecting the desire to stand out from others.

Those with WC professions (e.g. firefighters) reported feeling more positively about making the same choice as a friend (e.g. buying the same car), whereas MBAs felt irritated by making the same choice as a friend.

**These studies point to a more natural sense of solidarity among the working class.**
Psychological Difference #4

4.) LC’s favor *contextual explanations* for behavior, while UC’s favor *dispositional explanations*

National phone survey – “Why are people rich or poor?” LC more likely to emphasize contextual factors (e.g. political influence, discrimination), while UC more likely to endorse dispositional explanations (e.g. hard work, effort) for poverty. *And these effects hold even after controlling for political orientation.*

(skip? different) LC tends to take into account emotional expressions of those around a focal person when explaining their emotion; UC tends to only focus on the central person, independent of those around them.

(France, Russia & US) – workers more likely than executives to explain a hypothetical vignette (“A cashier leaves the store angry – why?”) based on contextual as opposed to dispositional (temperament) factors.

Workers see more context, while UC only sees personal, individual traits

UC tends toward an ethos of “personal responsibility,” while LC takes more likely to “blame the system” (e.g. Occupy). This distinction may also be seen in environmental activism: MC lifestyle politics vs. an Eco-socialist approach (“System Change not Climate Change”)
Psychological Difference #5

5.) LC’s will develop more communal relationship strategies, whereas UC’s will engage in more exchange relationship strategies
   – When explaining reasons for divorce, UCs are more likely to report conflict in values, partners’ excessive demands on them, and self-interest and incompatibility than LCs.
   – However, some evidence indicates LCs are more attuned to their partner’s emotions (Levenson & Gottman, 1983) and less likely to keep track of costs and benefits of social support (Clark & Mills, 1993), and show greater concern with need than equality of benefits.
   – [“Now that’s a vaguely socialist idea, no? ‘From each according to their ability and to each according to their needs’”]

• [!] In videotaped interactions meeting strangers, LC university students were more likely to show socially engaged nonverbal behaviors – head nods, eyebrow raises, laughs, and shared gaze – while UCs were more likely to socially disengage, displaying rude behaviors such as object manipulations (checking a cell phone), doodling, and self-grooming (Kraus & Keltner, 2009)!

• These studies point to a more natural openness to connection, understanding and potentially solidarity among WC
Psychological Difference #6

6.) LC’s tend to believe that social categories are *socially constructed*, while UC’s tend to *essentialize* social categories

Research on India’s caste system: story of adoption of a child in a different caste. Upper caste Indians thought the child would behave according to the caste of his/her birth parents; LC Indians responded that the child would behave according to the caste they were adopted into (social constructivist).

In the USA, LCs *(by both subjective and objective SES measures)* were more likely to endorse social constructivist theories (“It is impossible to determine one’s social class by examining their genes”) of social class while UCs endorse an unchangeable, inherent, biological view of class (“The kind of person one is can be largely attributed to their genetic inheritance”) (Kraus & Keltner, 2012).

Of course, Essentialist beliefs justify social hierarchies. An example is upper class, 19th century scientists espousing Social Darwinism – that some races and classes are inherently superior to others. This “dispositional” explanation is highly advantageous to the upper classes, and perpetuates inequality.

What makes LC more likely to see through this? Political interest, and a better position to feel that external circumstances, pressures, and social conditions make us who we are.

This helps to challenge Social Darwinism, and systemic inequality
Psychological Difference #7

• 7.) LC’s exhibit enhanced empathy, compassion, and behave more prosocially than UC’s
  – (help) LC spends proportionally more of their income on charity and assisting others in need, and less on costly consumer goods (e.g. cars) (Frank, 1999; Greve, 2009).
  – (solidarity) Controlled lab experiments (Piff et al., 2010): Lower subjective SES gave away to a stranger 40% more of a gift they were presumably to receive during an experiment. LC were more likely to help a distressed experiment partner by taking on a larger proportion of the workload in an experiment!
  – Earlier studies have found that people in positions of power respond with less compassion than individuals in low power positions (Van Kleef, 2008). With respect to class, LC’s report experiencing more daily compassion than UCs (using dispositional positive emotion scale, Shiota et al., 2006).

• [!] Fascinating Study with videos – one displaying human distress and suffering and the other neutral – found that LC college students showed decreased heart rate during the suffering video (a physiological response consistent with approach orientation to others), while UCs showed no such difference between the videos! (Stellar et al., 2011).
  – Unethical behavior: reported shoplifting occurs most frequently among individuals with at least some college education or household incomes over $70,000 (Blanco, 2008).
  – UCs measured in terms of subjective social class rank [and objective – value of car] were more likely to exhibit a variety of self-serving unethical behaviors, including cheating, lying, taking valuable goods from children, and driving in violation of the law (Piff et al., 2008) than UCs!
  – Wall St. has much higher rate of sociopaths than general population (Robert Hare’s research).

• How to explain greater prosocial behavior among LCs? Taylor (2000): says oxytocin networks triggered by threat then trigger attachment behaviors in harsh environments (this is the authors’ quite weak explanation for greater prosocial behavior in LC – weak!)
• A real explanation: A Marxist class analysis reveals that WC most cooperate on a daily basis in the course of doing their jobs (far more than bosses, rich).
  – The WC comes to rely on each other, neighbors for childcare, financial help, etc. (often in lieu of adequate social services). We “get by with a little help from our friends.”
  – Meanwhile, the individual capitalist is pulled to exploit WC without compassion or empathy, and has less need to connect with/rely on others.
Future Research Directions

• More cross-cultural work needed
• More work on intersection/overlap with race, gender, and other oppressions
• Other research I am involved in: how preschoolers from different class backgrounds use private speech to motivate themselves to take on challenge in play and pre-academic preschool approaches
Conclusion

• Exploitation and inequality remain pervasive in U.S. society, and I would argue endemic to capitalism.

• This creates unequal psychological outcomes and very different patterns among classes.

• However, the unique psychology engendered by the daily activity, material conditions, and social interactions of lower/working class individuals offers hope for collective action to transform these unjust social relations.
Some References


• Kraus, M. W., & Stephens, N. M. (2012). A road map for an emerging psychology of social class. Social and Personality Psychology Compass, 6(9), 642–656.


