

How Class Works in Popular Conception: Most Americans Identify with the Class Their Income, Occupation, and Education Implies for Them*

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Abstract

Americans' answers to questions about their social class show (1) awareness that class is an important aspect of American life and (2) reasonable patterns of strong association between subjective class identification and objective criteria like income, occupation, and education. Multivariate analysis of those responses shows that (3) class ambivalence and ambiguity is an issue for Americans whose jobs and incomes are inconsistent with their educations but (4) little evidence that other identities compete with objective class in forming class identities and (5) none of the trends that post-class theories suggest. Finally, subjective class identification correlates with a number of political attitudes and lifestyle indicators in ways that are consistent with canonical ideas about how class works.

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Introduction

Marx and Engels founded class analysis with their famous claim, in *The Communist Manifesto*, that “The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle.” Class analysts have struggled ever since to live down the founders’ boldness. Past and present societies turn out to be more complex than class struggle admits. But it is a serious error of both logic and fact to conclude that just because class falls short of explaining “all hitherto existing society,” it is somehow insignificant. As Erik Wright notes in *Class Counts* (1997, p. 1), “class is a pervasive social cause and thus it is worth exploring its ramifications for many social phenomena.” For birth weight and cause of death, when to marry and who to marry, where to live and where to eat, what to say and how to say it, class matters.¹ Scholars debate which aspect of class makes a difference and precisely how the several components of class combine to affect a specific outcome of interest, but the question “Are social classes dying?” has been answered with a loud “no.”² This chapter elaborates on how class remains salient by focusing on what everyday people tell us about their class location and how it relates to what we know about their education, occupation, and income.

Wright’s (2005a) challenge: “If ‘class’ is the answer, what is the question?” orients many chapters in this volume, including mine. He poses six questions that “class” might be answering. I go after the second of them: “What explains how people, individually and collectively, subjectively locate themselves and others in a structure of inequality?” To subjectively locate themselves and others, people have to correctly perceive the extent of social inequality, correctly identify where inequality comes from, and then correctly find their place in the unequal scheme of things. Little wonder then that the revolutionaries of one hundred years ago called out for a vanguard class to lead people through the complexities and more’s the wonder that Americans today find such coherent answers to questions about their class position.

¹References for each subject: birth weight (Conley, Strully, and Bennett 2003), mortality (Williams and Collins 1995; Link and Phelan this volume), age at marriage (Blau, Kahn, and Waldfogel 2000); neighborhood segregation by income (Fischer, Stockmayer, Stiles, and Hout 2004); eating out (Cohen 1999); language (Lamont 1992).

²See Clark and Lipset (1991) for the original question, Goldthorpe and Marshall (1992) and Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1993) for rebuttals, and Pakulski and Waters (1996), Wright (1996), and Manza and Brooks (1996) for another round of debate.

What do we mean by “class”?

To start the discussion we can think of class as

1. how people earn their money,
2. how much money they have, or
3. what they do with they money.³

For statistical analysis and descriptive work, any or all three can be useful. Sociologists tend to favor the first concept, that how a person makes their money defines their class. The original idea was that the so-called social relations of production set in motion historical forces that shaped consciousness and action. These days the concept addresses interests more directly – the idea being that people who earn their money the same way share interests in preserving or advancing their collective welfare. This approach can preserve the important idea that classes exist in relation to one another. A sociologist could think of class as rooted in where the money comes from without thinking it matters because some classes depend on the existence of other classes to get their money, but it is nearly impossible to maintain that one class exploits another without simultaneously embracing the idea that class is about where the money comes from. As examples, Weeden and Grusky (2005; this volume) frame classes as ways of earning a living in a given division of labor but do not interrogate the relation of any one class to another; Wright (1997, 2005b), on the other hand, makes the relation between exploiter and exploited paramount.

Class in this sense also resolves the conundrum of people on predictable trajectories. Medical students, White House interns, and others who see their current low-incomes as a short spell of “paying dues” are in most ways class equals with the people who currently occupy the positions these young people aspire to. Less certainly we might also hypothesize that people in their late fifties who have decent incomes right now but no pension to speak of might be already identifying with the struggles that lie not too far ahead of them.

Others, mostly economists, put money, no matter its origin, at the center of their models. People make choices under time and budget constraints. Having money relieves the budget constraint on

³This rephrases (with slight modification) Jencks’s (1991) rendering of the issue. So too does the following attribution of them as characteristic of sociologists, economists, and non-academics.

action. Trade-offs still exist because nobody has an infinite amount of money. But the more money a person accumulates, the less constrained that person's actions become. Not everyone does the same thing with their money. Some buy more things; others save. The point is that more income means more choices. People with looser budget constraints make different choices than people with tight budgets make. And, in that circumscribed way, class matters. In less circumscribed ways, too, money itself matters. In politics, the classic derivation is that people with money resist taxes in general and progressive taxation in particular (Downs 1957). In the United States today, high-income people care about different government services than low-income people do. High-income people support spending on public universities and roads, for example, but do not think the government should give poor people money. Meanwhile low-income people favor spending more on social welfare programs and drug treatment as well as raising the minimum wage.⁴

Lifestyle – what people do with the money they have – is an important consideration in Bourdieu's approach to class (see Lamont 1992, 2000; Weininger 2005; Lareau and Weininger this volume). Bound up with privilege and interests are *habitus*, the specific orientation to social life that predisposes some classes to one mode of being and other classes to another mode. These are serious aspects of class analysis, but I do not consider them here (a) because *habitus* is as much a dependent variable as an independent variable and (b) because the data at my disposal were not designed to address this issue.

Popular conceptions of class also bring up lifestyle issues as typified by Roger Hodge's list of class terms (this volume). Many items on his class list – rich, poor, professional, blue collar, white collar, Wall Street, suit, service worker, Ivy League, state school, preppy, public, and college boy – invoke where the money comes from. But his other terms blend location, consumption, and reputation in terms such as ghetto, skank, trailer trash, redneck, fabulous, and about a dozen more. These informal appellations blend privilege, taste, and geography in ways that indicate Americans' fascination with class, distinction, and respect. As Hodge says, they expose the myth of classless America as, itself, a myth. The blending makes them useless as explanatory tools, even if we could reduce them to measurement, but they might make interesting research subjects in their own right if somebody could establish their relative currency and had an analysis strategy for parsing the

⁴Baldassare (2006) and my own analysis of the GSS.

relative contributions of privilege, taste, etc.

If we are interested in describing social patterns, then virtually any notion that captures how people differentiate themselves into “haves” and “have lesses” will serve that purpose – some better, some worse. And so, for descriptive work, researchers use a wide array of measures and observations to capture class differences. As my aims are primarily descriptive, I show in the rest of the chapter that peoples’ answers to simple questions make common sense and correlate with the most straightforward battery of objective conditions – education, occupation, and income.⁵ I also present evidence of variation in how education, occupation, and income relate to subjective class placement to test others’ theories of how class works (or doesn’t).

To move from description to a causal explanation, though, much more would be required. My descriptive data show that what people say goes with what they do for a living and what they have. An explanation would tell *why* they say what they do. Done right, a causal statement inexorably links being in one class rather than another with having one idea rather than another. Optimally a powerful theory would imply a specific classification scheme which, in turn, would embed in the necessary distinction of one category from another the explanation of why they differ. This complete package of theory, classification scheme, and explanation is class analysis as Marx and Engels understood it, and class analysis as some of their successors still see it. But, for the most part, the more comprehensive schemes have a weaker empirical record than the demographic approaches like mine that show associations too strong to ignore but do not link theory, classification, and explanation.

Variation in Class Identification

Class awareness and identification

What Americans say about social class depends on what question they are asked and what answers are suggested to them. Perhaps a skeptic could make the case that this regularity implies that Americans are unsure about what they think. But to me it looks like survey respondents pay attention

⁵The first two are “where-the-money-comes-from” sociological measures; income is a “how much?” economist’s measure.

to what we ask them. The American National Election Study (ANES)⁶ and the General Social Survey (GSS)⁷ are two large projects that assess Americans' opinions on a variety of subjects and have done so for a long time. The ANES frequently asked at least part of its sample this question about social class:

There's been some talk these days about different social classes. Most people say they belong either to the middle class or the working class. Do you ever think of yourself as belonging in one of these classes?

At various times from 1956 to 2000, about two-thirds of American adults said they do think of themselves as belonging to one of those two classes (68 percent over all the years), and there was no consistent trend.⁸

The follow-up to the question "Do you belong to a class?" is, obviously enough, "Which one do you belong to?" In 2000, 59 percent of Americans eligible to vote said middle class and 41 percent working class. In the 1950s, people split the other way around: 40 percent middle class and 60 percent working class. Equal numbers chose middle and working classes from the 1960s through 1992. The one-third of people who initially said they did not belong to either the middle or working class were asked "Well, if you had to make a choice, would you call yourself

⁶Beginning in 1948, the American National Election Studies have drawn a representative sample of adults eligible to vote in years that have national elections in the United States. Originally the interviews were face-to-face, ninety-minute interviews that combined forced choice and open-ended questions (see Campbell, Converse, and Miller 1960). Since then panels have been used in some years, phone interviews in some, and mail-back questionnaires in others. Sample sizes have ranged from 662 in 1948 to 2,485 in 1992 with an average close to 1,500.

⁷The General Social Survey (GSS) has, since 1972, conducted face-to-face interviews with representative samples of English-speaking adults on a wide array of subjects. For the first 22 years, the GSS was fielded almost every year; the size of the main samples averaged 1,500 interviews (oversamples of African Americans made 1982 and 1987 bigger). Since 1994, the GSS has been fielded in even-numbered years with sample sizes averaging 2,850 interviews. Beginning in 2006, interviews will be in Spanish as well as English.

⁸The range of positive answers – from 61 percent to 75 percent – is wider than the NES's margin of error, so the association between answer and year is statistically significant. But there is no discernible trend. The high point was 1960, and it was followed by the two lowest points in 1964 and 1968; the second highest point was reached in 1988. The 2004 ANES did not include this question.

Table 1. Subjective Social Class: All and Employed, 25 Years and Older.

<i>Class</i>	<i>All</i>	<i>Employed</i>
	%	%
Upper class	4	3
Middle class	47	46
Working class	44	48
Lower class	5	3
Total	100	100
Number of cases	7,518	4,806

Note: Cases weighted to adjust for sample design.

Source: General Social Surveys, 2000-2004.

middle class or working class?” Throughout the years these people who initially averred class membership have responded “working class” by a 56 percent to 37 percent majority (about one percent volunteered “lower” or “poor,” one percent volunteered “upper” or “rich,” three percent said there are no classes, and one or two percent gave uncoded responses).⁹

The GSS asks just one direct question of all its respondents: “If you were asked to use one of four names for your social class, which would you say you belong in: the lower class, the working class, the middle class, or the upper class?” This question gets an answer from 99.4 percent of the people who hear it. Americans in the present decade split more or less equally between middle- and working-class responses (as in the ANES data of the 1960s through the 1990s). This wording yields more “upper” and “lower” answers than the ANES question, though (three to five percent chose the “lower” and three to five percent chose “upper”). Table 1 illustrates this general finding with data from the 2000-2004 GSSs. The “middle class” answer edged out “working class” by 4 percentage points here. Restricting attention to people who have jobs, the slight advantage swings to “working class.” When Richard Centers (1949) first asked this exact question in 1945, 49 percent identified as working class and 45 percent as middle class. Americans’ answers changed remarkably little in sixty years. Considering the increases in education, professional employment, income, home ownership, and other economic indicators since 1945, it would be reasonable to have expected the middle class to have grown more than just two points and the working class to have declined by

⁹There is no significant trend in the answers.

more than five points. For subjective changes to lag so far behind objective changes hints that many Americans answer based on their relative education, occupation, and income, perhaps discounting improvements that all share. The multivariate analysis I present later in this chapter is consistent with this idea, as is much research on subjective well-being (Hout 2003).

Retired people and homemakers identified as middle class significantly more than people in the labor force did. Retirees' earning days are behind them, so their annual family incomes understate their standard of living. Presumably they have lower expenses, especially if they have paid off their mortgage, might have some savings, and may simply continue to think of their class position as that of their lifestyle before retirement. In any event, their identities are somewhat marginal to the class awareness debates though they should perhaps get more attention.

Homemakers are marginal in a different way. Most of them are engaged in a division of labor that puts the need to earn money on their spouse. Their class identities reflect their family incomes pretty much as employed people's do (Baxter 1994). But, as they have no current position in the occupational division of labor, their answers make no reference to any specific position in the occupational structure, unlike employed or retired people's answers. Their husband's occupation dominates their class placement.

Employed people expressed a working-class identity slightly more often than they said they were middle-class – 48 percent compared to 46 percent (3 percent said lower and 3 percent said upper class). Detailed breakdowns by employment status (not shown) show that extreme answers were slightly less common among the employed than among the retired and students; homemakers resembled the employed.

The ANES and GSS coach respondents with references to the middle and working classes in their questions. Open-ended questions that do not prompt respondents with any answer categories get far more mentions of the middle class and far fewer mentions of the working class. In 1964, a mere six percent of American adults volunteered “working class” in response to the question “What social class do you consider yourself a member of?” (Hodge and Treiman 1968). Our 1991 survey of American adults (Hout et al. 1992) returned more mentions – 16 percent – but it is nonetheless a rare American who thinks “working class” without a prompt.¹⁰ The modal reply in

¹⁰Our 1991 survey focused on class in America and probably had more prompts in the questions leading up to the open-ended class question than the Hodge and Treiman survey did (I do not have the Hodge and Treiman questionnaire,

the 1991 survey was to mention upper, middle, and lower classes (or equivalents like rich, middle, and poor or high, middle, and low).¹¹ Coleman and Rainwater (1978) got similar responses in a regional study. They note the similarity between this characterization of the U.S. class structure and the conclusions reached by the “community studies” tradition (Warner, Meeker, and Eels 1960; Lockwood 1966).

Some scholars have looked to this kind of evidence that Americans rarely use the term working class to question the salience of the working-class identity in particular and, occasionally, class identities altogether (most recently, Kingston 2000). That goes too far, I think. Over ninety percent of Americans offer an answer to open-ended class questions, 99.4 percent answer the close-ended question, and two-thirds of the electorate says it is a “member” of a social class. Americans are “class-aware,” as Jackman and Jackman (1983) put it. Most need prompting before they use the working class label; perhaps “working class” reflects some vestige of the Cold War. But there is definitely class awareness in America in this decade.

As Halle (1984) famously pointed out, references to “working man” are far more prevalent than references to “working class,” even in factory settings. I would add that the references to “working families” in the 2006 congressional election race raised class issues far more than it brought up issues about labor force participation.

Having demonstrated that Americans will answer class questions, I now turn to whether their answers make substantive sense; the alternative being that they are random acquiescence to the survey situation, that is an indication of the politeness of survey respondents that tells us nothing about their class awareness. The first way to tell if the answers are substantive or merely polite is to see if the answers correlate with the education, occupation, and income. The second way is to see if the answers correlate with things class is supposed to predict.

Of course others have taken this approach before. From their research it is clearly more reasonable to say that Americans have flexible – and maybe multiple – class identities than to say they have none. The social science literature on class identification in the 1960s emphasized “status

so I cannot say for sure). Another possibility, though somewhat remote considering the lack of change in answers to forced-choice questions, is that the working-class label became more prominent between 1964 and 1991.

¹¹Despite the rich mix of labels that Roger Hodge was able to invoke.

inconsistencies” attributable to the modest correlations among income, occupation, and education (Hodge and Treiman 1968). People understand what goes into being middle class or working class in the abstract, but many find themselves in complicated positions that imply different class identities. “A merchant marine seaman, who was buying an apartment house for investment purposes, . . . thought he was ‘about middle class as an apartment house owner, and working class as a merchant marine’” (Yoshino 1951, p. 114; quoted in Hodge and Treiman 1968, p. 535). Factory foremen with no high school diploma but substantially above-average incomes and suburban tract homes have similar split identities. Small-town school teachers with advanced degrees but incomes below the national average may be less conflicted about their middle-class status, yet some identify with the working class, especially the ones who are married to factory workers. And we will see later that entrepreneurs, regardless of education, answer according to the incomes of their clientele; if they sell car parts or farm supplies they are less likely to identify as middle class than if they sell suits to business men.

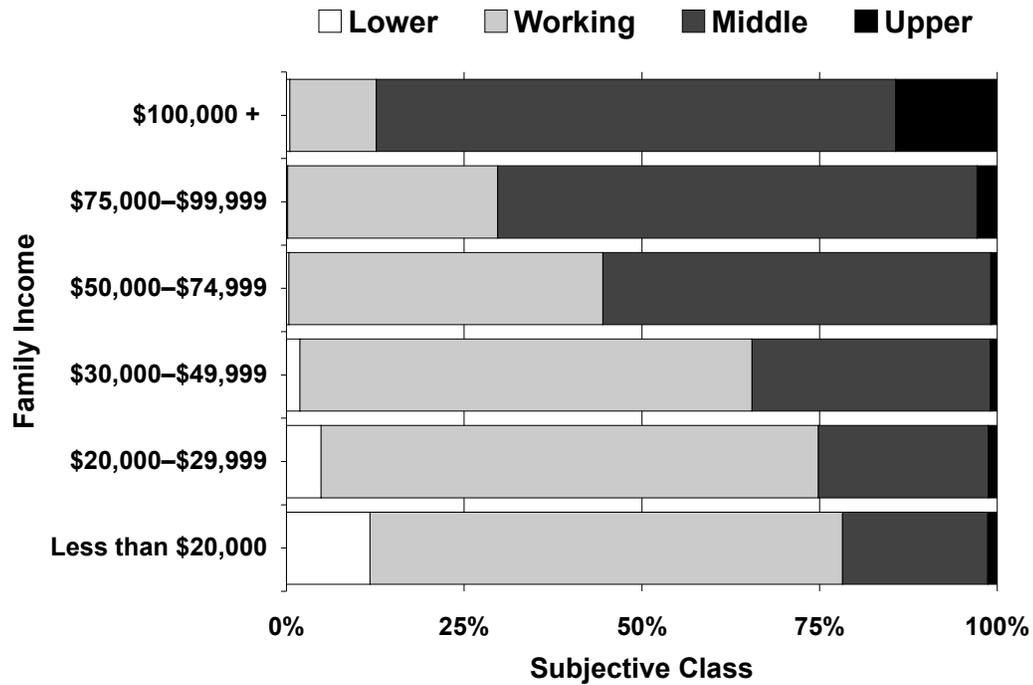
Complexity exists in the loose connection among objective characteristics and in the way that workplaces and home settings mobilize different aspects of peoples’ identities. Halle (1984) elaborated the “complexity” argument based on his participant observations in a New Jersey refinery (known by the pseudonym “Imperium”):

The concept of the working man expresses both class and gender consciousness for Imperium workers. As a form of class consciousness, its central idea is that blue-collar work takes a distinctive form and is productive in a way that the work of other classes is not. As a form of gender consciousness it implies such work is for men, not women.

Like Yoshino’s merchant seaman, Halle’s factory workers tune into the consciousness and politics of how physical their work is and the surveillance they are under, but away from the refinery they tune into their interests as homeowners and providers.

Class awareness also manifests itself in Americans’ willingness to attribute class rank to others. When presented with mini-biographies or vignettes (as in Coleman and Rainwater 1978), people have the ability to calculate their own and others’ social positions. More important for our purposes here, they give greater weight to differences in education, occupation, and income than to other

Figure 1. Class Identification by Family Income: Employed, 25 Years and Older.



Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

“facts” woven into the vignettes – the hypothetical person’s race, gender, marital status, and age.

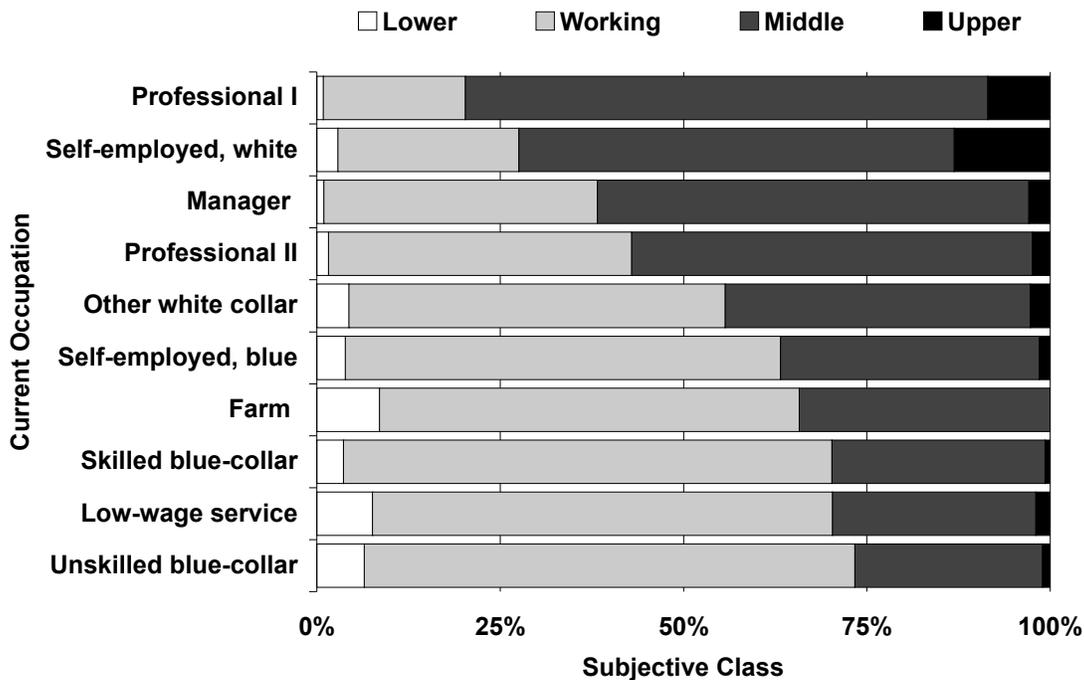
Objective and subjective class

Americans, for the most part, express identities that are quite congruent with their objective circumstances. Figures 1-3 reveal for employed persons clear, strong relationships between subjective class and each major class indicator – family income, current occupation, and education.¹² Multivariate analyses in subsequent figures and tables show that each factor contributes even when the other two (and other relevant factors) are held constant.

Figure 1 shows the sharp differences among the subjective class identifications of six income groups. Among employed Americans in families with incomes under \$20,000 per year, 20 per-

¹²GSS is the data source for these figures. People under 25 years of age are excluded because a significant and non-random portion of the 18-24 year-old group are out of the sample because they are still in school. As the excluded students are likely to be the most successful members of their cohorts in the long run, their absence biases what we see as the 18-24 year-old group.

Figure 2. Class Identification by Occupation: Employed, 25 Years and Older.



Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

cent identified as middle class. Middle-class identification rises with income, but most people in families with an income under \$50,000 identified with the working class. At \$50,000 the majority identified with the middle class, two-thirds of those with annual incomes between \$75,000 and \$100,000 did so, and in families with annual incomes \$100,000 and over, three-fourths saw themselves as middle class and most of the rest identified as upper class. Only in that top income category did a significant fraction see themselves as upper class.

Figure 2 shifts attention to the subjective class placements of people in different occupations. To classify occupations, I started with the oft-used Erikson-Goldthorpe (1992) class scheme. It distinguishes a “salarial” or professionals and managers, other white collar employees, self-employed entrepreneurs, farmers, skilled blue collar workers, unskilled blue collar workers, and low-wage service workers. Optionally the scheme separates upper and lower professionals; physicians, attorneys, engineers, etc., are the upper and school teachers, nurses, social workers, etc., are lower. The prevalence of unions for many of the lower professions suggests that they might be open to a working class identity that would be harder for upper professionals to embrace. To this scheme

I add two additional distinctions. First, following Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995), I separate professionals and managers. I also distinguish between the self-employed non-professionals who would be classed as white collar based on their occupation and those who would be blue collar in order to separate the impact of employment status better. Figure 2 ranks these ten classes from highest percentage middle class to lowest.

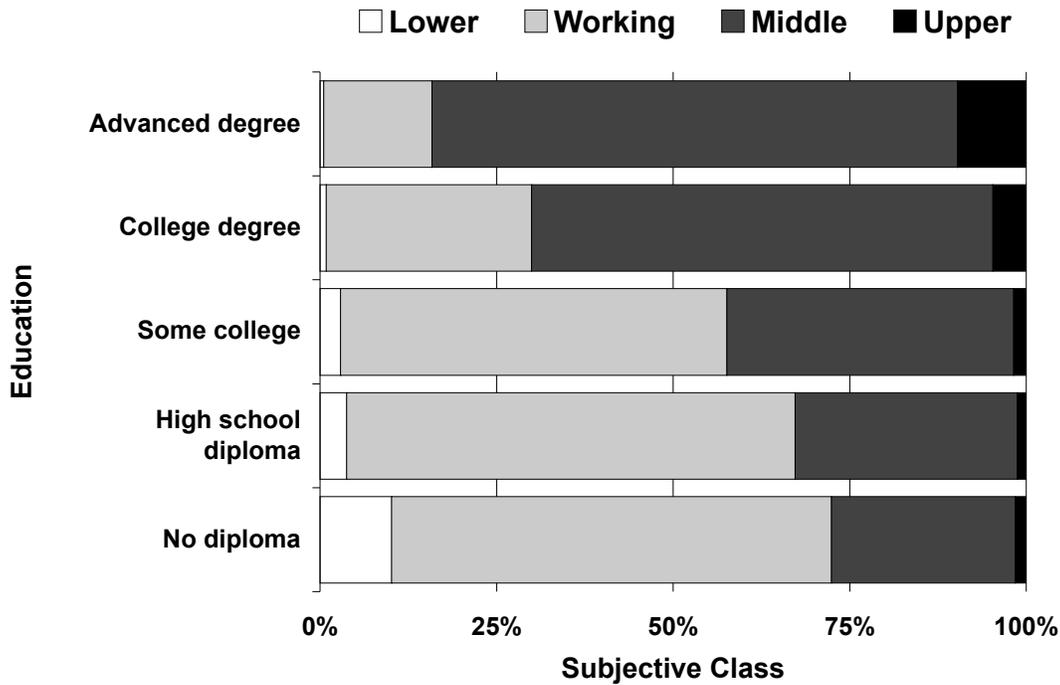
Strong majorities of upper professionals, managers, and white-collar self-employed identified with the middle class and upper classes: 71 percent of the top professionals said middle class and 9 percent said upper class, 59 percent of white-collar self-employed were middle class and 13 percent upper class, and 59 percent of managers were middle class with 5 percent upper class. Lower professionals were more closely divided, but a majority – 55 percent – identified with the middle class. Majorities of employed people from all other classes identified with the working class. Other white-collar workers split 42 percent middle class and 51 percent working class. The blue-collar categories – including self-employed blue-collar workers – had strong to very strong working-class majorities. Two-thirds of skilled and unskilled blue-collar workers identified with the working class; another 6 percent of unskilled blue-collar workers identified with the lower class. Low-wage service workers were very similar to the unskilled blue-collar workers at 63 percent working class and 8 percent lower class.

These relationships are all based on peoples' own current occupations. Janeen Baxter (1994) found that married women tend to give more weight to their husbands' occupations than their own when answering subjective class questions. However, when I substituted husband's occupations for the occupations of married women¹³ and redid Figure 2, there was no substantively interesting difference. The biggest difference was in the number of cases available for analysis; the substitution increased the number of valid cases from 4,768 to 5,180. The largest change in subjective class was an increase in middle-class identification among low-wage service workers from 27 percent to 30 percent.

Figure 3 shifts our attention to education. College graduates identified with the middle class; less-educated people identified with the working class. Moving from highest to lowest education, we see that among people with a degree beyond the bachelor's 75 percent identified with the

¹³I only made the substitution if the husband was currently living with the wife and currently working.

Figure 3. Class Identification by Education: Employed, 25 Years and Older.



Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

middle class and another 10 percent with the upper class, 67 percent of those whose BA was their highest degree thought of themselves as middle class, 41 percent of people with some college but no degree thought of themselves as middle class, 29 percent of high school graduates did, and only 23 percent high school dropouts identified with middle class. Working-class identification pretty much complemented the middle-class identification, though 10 percent of high school dropouts actually viewed themselves as lower class.

These three charts show that Americans not only recognize the class labels, they know how to use them as social scientists would. Each figure portrays a strong statistical relationship. Two comparisons that use the GSS's subjective income question: "Compared with American families in general, would you say your family income is far below average, below average, average, above average, or far above average?" establish the strength of these relationships. We would reasonably expect answers to the more specific subjective-income question to track family income more closely than the answers to subjective class do. And that is what the data show. In a statistical model that summarizes the relationship in Figure 1 with a single coefficient, we get a value of

1.57; applying the same model to the subjective income data we get a value of 1.95.¹⁴ The relationship between family income and subjective class is 81 percent as strong as the relationship between family income and subjective income.

We can just as reasonably expect that education and occupation will relate more closely to subjective class than to subjective income, once we control for actual income in multivariate statistical models. So my second comparison involves the coefficients for income, occupation, and education in association with subjective class and subjective income. The results are in Table 2. As in the bivariate model, the association between family income and subjective income exceeds that for subjective class. The main effect of education on subjective class is twice its value for subjective income; the add-on effect of an advanced degree – important for understanding subjective class – is not even statistically significant in the subjective income equation. The coefficients for most occupations are larger in the class column than in income column. The exceptions are the significant coefficients for the self-employed blue-collar and skilled blue-collar categories; people in those two occupations are further above unskilled blue-collar workers in subjective income than in subjective class.

Ambiguity and Ambivalence

To this point I have debunked the claim that Americans deny class by showing that less than 3 percent explicitly deny class by refusing or failing to answer class questions and by confirming that a significant fraction of American adults identify with the working class. Furthermore I have

¹⁴To reduce the relationship to a single coefficient, I transformed family income first to adjust for inflation (as in Figure 1), then I recoded low incomes so that all incomes below \$15,000 were treated as if they were \$15,000 (scatterplots showed a flat relationship at the very lowest incomes), and finally I took the natural logarithm of the numbers at that point. The logarithmic transformation is fairly standard practice in research of this kind. It is sometimes called a ratio-scale transformation because in the log-scale the difference between \$15,000 and \$30,000 is the same as the differences between \$30,000 and \$60,000 or \$45,000 and \$90,000. In the same way, other ratios (say five, as in \$10,000 to \$50,000 and \$25,000 to \$125,000) produce the constant differences on the logarithmic scale. Scatterplots of percentage middle class by family income showed a pattern that is consistent with this ratio-scale treatment. I then used the transformed income measure as an independent variable in an ordered logistic regression model. That model has special assumptions (see Long 1997) that I did not test here because I was mostly interested in a convenient summary measure. I doubt that the relative effects would be different if another model was the basis of comparison.

Table 2. Net Effects of Objective Variables on Subjective Social Class and Subjective Income: Employed, 25 Years and Older

<i>Objective variable</i>	<i>Dependent Variable</i>	
	Subjective Class	Subjective Income
Family income (ratio scale)	1.318* (.068)	1.786* (.087)
<u>Occupation</u>		
Professional I	1.103* (.168)	.704* (.172)
Professional II	.404* (.159)	.102 (.143)
Manager	.604* (.124)	.461* (.142)
Other white-collar	.308* (.149)	.321* (.146)
Self-employed, white-collar	1.017* (.208)	.671* (.206)
Self-employed, blue-collar	.282 (.228)	.459* (.220)
Skilled blue-collar	-.065 (.145)	.422* (.142)
Unskilled blue-collar	0 —	0 —
Low-wage service	.200 (.164)	-.102 (.150)
Farm	.165 (.426)	-.613 (.434)
<u>Education</u>		
Main	.302* (.060)	.147* (.047)
Advanced degree	.348* (.142)	.218 (.160)
<i>Number of cases</i>	4,332	2,876

*Statistically significant at conventional level ($p < .05$).

Notes: The GSS design calls for skipping the subjective income question for a random one-third of respondents, yielding fewer cases for analysis. Intercepts were suppressed to save space.

Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

established that they put meaning into their choices by identifying with class labels that correspond to their objective circumstances. The case cannot rest there. It has been made before (Jackman and Jackman 1983; Wright 1997) and failed to convince class deniers (Clark and Lipset 1993; Kingston 2000). Significant variation in class identities that correlates with objective criteria is insufficient to prove that class is salient for Americans because the correlates are said to be indeterminate (Kingston 2000, p. 100) and the variation is said to be inconsequential (Kingston 2000, pp. 101-158). I take up the issue of determinacy in this section and the issue of consequence later in this chapter.

The link between objective and subjective class is clear when the objective class elements – income, occupation, and education – are all at their highest or lowest values. Ninety-six percent of professionals and managers with advanced degrees and family incomes over \$110,000 identify with the middle (75 percent) or upper class (21 percent). At the other extreme, 81 percent of unskilled blue-collar employees with no high-school diploma and a family income less than \$20,000 identify as working (56 percent) or lower (25 percent) class.¹⁵ Some people get mixed class signals because their income, occupation, and education do not line up – a condition Hodge and Treiman (1968) called “status inconsistency.” People become ambivalent about their subjective class because, objectively, they are in more than one; forced to choose by the way most survey questions are posed, some pick middle class and others pick working class. Other people have an income, occupation, and education at the boundary between working and middle class. For them, their subjective class is ambiguous. People near the class border disagree on which class they are in, the percentage identifying with the working class comes close to the percentage identifying with the middle class, and objective class fails to determine subjective class. Both the ambivalence of status inconsistency and the ambiguity of being near the class border can be problems for class analysis, depending on their prevalence.

Status inconsistency arises because income, occupation, and education correlate but not perfectly. A person’s income depends on education and occupation, to be sure, but also on things like employment status, gender, racial ancestry, marital status, spouse’s earnings, local economic

¹⁵Unless otherwise noted, all calculations refer to people 25 years and older in the GSS, 2000-2004. Sampling weights were used to adjust for the complex design in 2004.

conditions, wealth, talent, pluck, luck, and other factors.¹⁶ So inconsistencies arise and create class ambivalence.

Status inconsistency is probably not quite as prevalent now as it was in 1964 when the data Hodge and Treiman used were collected. Changes in the economy have eradicated some of the inconsistencies. Earnings inequality rose significantly and did so in a way that modestly reduced status inconsistency. The association between education and earnings climbed through the 1970s and 1980s (e.g., Card and DiNardo 2002). Industrial changes made high-paying low-status jobs much harder to come by, especially for high-school dropouts (Fischer and Hout 2006, chapter 5). Marriage partners have increasingly similar educations (Schwartz and Mare 2005). And women's rising educational attainments have increased not only their own earnings but their match to a higher earning husband (DiPrete and Buchmann 2006). Statistical models (not shown) indicate that family income gaps among occupations and educational categories grew bigger from 1980 onward.¹⁷ These trends have resolved some of the complexities Americans contend with when weighing their social class identification.

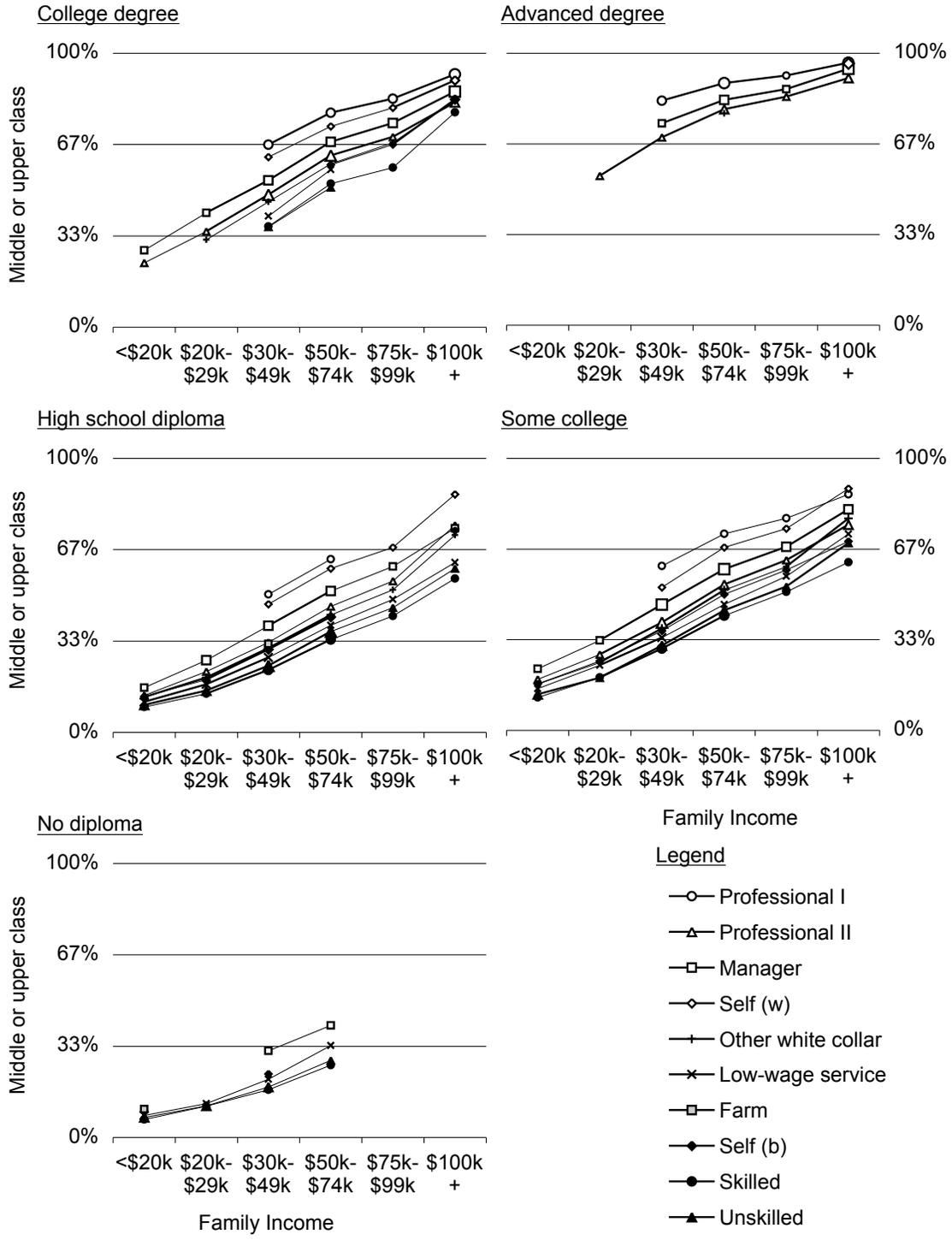
To gain some insight into how status inconsistency works out in the contemporary setting, Figure 4 shows middle- and upper-class identification by income, occupation, and education among employed people circa 2004.¹⁸ The patterns reflect the consequences of both status inconsistency

¹⁶I could cite any number of authorities here, including Jencks (1972), Fischer et al. (1996), and Keister (2005), but this is best thought of as the professional consensus about family incomes. For while scholars might debate how much weight to give each item, it is fair to say that few, if any, sociologists, economists, or demographers would argue against this list.

¹⁷Following Harding et al. (2004), I analyzed annual family, not personal, income. The coefficients indicate that the absolute contribution of occupation and education to inequality in income grew. The R-square, a statistic that indicates how much of the family income variance is "explained" by occupation and education did not increase over the last 25 years, though. It would have, all else being equal, but, in fact, the income inequality within the big classes I use here increased even as the differences among the income categories were increasing. The R-square gauges the proportional contribution of education and occupation to the total inequality – and because the parts and the whole grew at a roughly equal pace, the R-square stayed the same.

¹⁸I used logistic regression to model the percentage identifying with the middle or upper class because a Wald test rejected the key assumption of the ordered logistic regression model – that all independent variables affect each subjective-class contrast identically – when the list of independent variables grew beyond the three objective class

Figure 4. Identification with Middle or Upper Class by Family Income, Occupation, and Education: Employed, 25 Years and Older



Note: Larger symbols and darker lines indicate more frequent combinations; small symbols and light lines indicate rare combinations; unobserved combinations left off the chart.
 Source: Statistical model using data from General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

and living on the class border. People with consistently high or low statuses agreed on a class identity. Workers in low-status occupations who had low family incomes identified with the working and lower classes by at least a 2:1 margin – that is, two-thirds or more were working or lower class and one-third or less were middle or upper class. In a complementary way, three-fourths or more of upper professionals, managers, and the white-collar self-employed in families with incomes of \$75,000 or more identified with the middle and upper classes. Status inconsistency led to subjective class ambiguity (in the form of expected percentages closer to 50 percent); it rose as income rose for lower-status workers and as income fell for high-status employees and entrepreneurs. Middle-status employees of all incomes split their identifications. Lower professionals, routine white-collar workers, and the blue-collar self-employed split their identifications more closely unless their incomes fell below \$40,000 (in which case strong majorities agreed they were working or lower class) or rose above \$75,000 (in which case strong majorities agreed they were middle class).

Thus the nearly even split of Americans into the middle and working classes reflects (1) the balance of consistently high and consistently low status class locations, (2) ambivalence due to status inconsistency, and (3) ambiguity about the borderline that separates the working class from the middle class among people like high-school graduates with average incomes and routine jobs who might fall on either side of the line.

What does this say about whether objective class determines subjective class? In the purely statistical sense, these are strong relationships and most analysts would characterize the range of expected outcomes from near 10 percent to well over 90 percent middle class as very large. But expected percentages between 33 percent and 67 percent leave the door open a crack to those who would argue for “classless” conclusion. The prevalence of clear class outcomes relative to

variables in Table 2. So I switched to logistic regression and focused on the contrast that is key to most discussions, that on the border between middle- and working-class identification. The dependent variable equals one if the person identified with the middle or upper class and zero if the person identified with the working or lower class. I expanded the list of independent variables to include employment status and year of survey, used weights to compensate for design features in the 2004 survey. See documentation on the sampling strategies at <http://sda.berkeley.edu> (click on General Social Survey cumulative file and follow links to sampling design). The expected percentages in Figure 4 pertain to employed people in 2004.

ambivalent or ambiguous ones might close that door if clear class positions predominate. If we can agree that it is a clear class outcome when those who can be expected to identify as middle or upper class outnumber those we expect not to by a ratio of two-to-one and when they are outnumbered by that same two-to-one ratio, then we can calculate how many American adults are in clear class positions and how many are in ambivalent or ambiguous ones.¹⁹ Among working people, 61 percent are in clear class positions – their expected percentages under this simple statistical model are either less than one-third or greater than two-thirds – and 39 percent are in ambivalent or ambiguous positions. Combining employed and non-employed adults reveals more ambivalence and ambiguity; 58 percent of all adults are in clear class positions and 42 percent are in ambivalent or ambiguous positions. Retired people’s tendency to identify more strongly with the middle class than we would otherwise expect accounts for the lower clarity in the total population.²⁰

Adding criteria that many Americans consider relevant to class placement – home ownership, living in certain neighborhoods, belong to a union – and some that a few consider relevant – marriage, children, church membership, leisure pursuits, etc. – improves the fit of statistical models to data but also yields more ways to detect ambivalent class signals – college graduates in poor neighborhoods, low-income home owners. In other words the longer the list of relevant factors, the more possibilities for inconsistencies that make choosing a class hard for people. And by most indications, Americans use a rather long list. Recall Yoshino’s merchant seaman and Halle’s working men introduced above. They actually invoked dual identities – working class on the job and middle class elsewhere. The GSS question does not give people the opportunity to choose more than one. So different people resolve it differently in the interview, yielding ambiguity. So when I elaborated the statistical model to include all the factors above, I once again found that 61 percent of employed people were in clear class positions, and 39 percent were in ambivalent or ambiguous ones.

The final consideration is whether people in clear class positions actually identified as the

¹⁹I do not have a criterion for distinguishing ambivalent from ambiguous positions.

²⁰Retirees’ answers probably reflect their worklife incomes, which we have no measure of, as well as their current incomes. Retirees also tend to have more home equity and other financial resources than working people do (Keister 2005). They might be considering their assets too.

model predicted they would. They did by a four-to-one margin. Among employed people in a clear working-class position 79 percent identified as either working class (71 percent) or lower class (8 percent). Among employed people in clear middle-class positions 86 percent identified with either the middle class (77 percent) or upper class (9 percent). When class is harder to predict, the split is much closer to even; 47 percent middle class and 53 percent working class (less than 1 percent each upper and lower class).²¹

Taken together, these results amount to more evidence that objective class affects subjective class than most other studies yield. The evidence accumulated in this analysis yields a clearer picture of how objective class affects subjective class and why class is occasionally ambiguous and why some Americans might be objectively ambivalent about their class position.

Competing identities

Post-class advocates such as Pakulski (2005) argue that other aspects of modern life offer Americans choices about their identities that compete with their class position. The distraction of marital, religious, racial, and regional identities blunts the impact of class in American life. A full canvass of how this might or might not be a reasonable assessment of contemporary U.S. society and culture is beyond the scope of this chapter. But among its key hypotheses is the idea that people are becoming less responsive to their objective class positions in forming their sense of their place in society and in making important choices. I consider four hypotheses that would have to be true for the post-class thesis to make sense:

1. The net effect of objective class after statistically controlling for competing identities is notably smaller than the gross effect of objective class by itself.
2. The net effect of objective class after statistically controlling for competing identities is notably smaller than the net effects of some of the competing variables.
3. The effect of objective class is notably weaker for people with strong competing identities, e.g., southerners, parents, religious people, than in general.

²¹Note that almost all the upper and lower class identification arose in class positions that were either clearly above or clearly below the middle-class / working-class border.

4. The effect of objective class on subjective class has declined since the 1970s.

If these hypotheses are confirmed, it will strengthen the argument that competing identities blunt the effects of objective class on subjective class. If the hypotheses are rejected, it will seriously weaken the post-class case and strengthen the perspective that held sway at the conference – that Americans understand class and its implications for describing American inequality.

If competing identities were blunting the effects of class, then either other identities would matter more than objective class in the analysis of subjective class or adding those factors to the model would reduce my estimates of objective-class differences in subjective social class. Substantial differences between the coefficients in the gross and net columns in Table 3 would confirm this first hypothesis. The evidence contradicts this first hypothesis. The net effects of education and family income are actually slightly larger than they appear to be without controls; the net effect of education is 8 percent bigger than its gross effect and the net effect of family income is 6 percent bigger than its gross effect. The effect of occupation is a little harder to discern because it is the combination of nine coefficients. In previous research my colleagues and I introduced a useful statistic, κ , for these kinds of situations; κ equals the standard deviation of the occupational coefficients (see Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995). In the gross column the κ for occupation is .356; in the net column it is .335. Thus competing identities were not blunting the impact of objective class.

The evidence clearly negates the second hypothesis also. Income, occupation, and education all have much bigger effects than any of the competing identities. Racial ancestry, for example, forms powerful identities in the United States. Furthermore, African Americans are significantly less likely to voice a middle-class identity than whites; 35 percent of African Americans versus 54 percent of whites say they are middle or upper class. Yet all of that difference is attributable to racial differences in objective class variables. The coefficient for being African American in a model that predicts class from nothing but racial categories is $-.770$ (its standard error is $.090$), and it perfectly reproduces the observed 19 percentage-point difference between African Americans and whites.²² In the net effects model the coefficient for being African American is a trivial $-.096$

²²The transformation of logits into probabilities is not linear, but a rule-of-thumb aids interpretation: 5 percent, 10 percent, and 25 percent are close to -3 , -2 , and -1 on the logit scale, 50 percent is exactly zero on the logit scale, and

Table 3. Net Effects of Objective Variables on Subjective Social Class Alone and with Socio-Demographic Controls: Employed, 25 Years and Older

<i>Objective variable</i>	<i>Model</i>	
	Objective only	with controls
<u>Family income (ratio-scale)</u>		
Main effect	.957*	1.017*
	(.061)	(.069)
Topcode	.467*	.353*
	(.169)	(.170)
<u>Occupation</u>		
Professional I	1.065*	1.019*
	(.167)	(.170)
Professional II	.356*	.326*
	(.128)	(.130)
Manager	.583*	.558*
	(.101)	(.105)
Other white collar	.314*	.277*
	(.104)	(.105)
Self-employed, white-collar	.766*	.597*
	(.174)	(.179)
Self-employed, blue-collar	.263	.210
	(.173)	(.177)
Skilled blue-collar	-.260*	-.282*
	(.127)	(.127)
Less-skilled blue-collar	0	0
	—	—
Low-wage service	.192	.198
	(.108)	(.116)
Farm	.328	.237
	(.340)	(.346)
<u>Education</u>		
Main effect	.233*	.253*
	(.047)	(.051)
Advanced degree	.593*	.453*
	(.145)	(.149)
<i>Number of cases</i>	6,424	6,424

*Statistically significant at conventional level ($p < .05$).

Note: The additional variables are racial ancestry, gender, marital status, age, region, religion, and attendance at religious services.

Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

(its standard error is .104) which corresponds to an adjusted difference between African Americans and whites of just 2 percent (at the means of all other variables).

Most other competing identities also show gross differences that disappear when objective class measures are statistically controlled. Married people are more middle class than single people in the cross-section, but the net difference is insignificant. Parents with children at home are more middle class than other Americans in the cross-section but not within objective class categories. Religious people are more middle class than people with no religion, but only Jews are more middle class than would be expected based on their objective class characteristics. Conservative Christians and Catholics are significantly *less* middle class than their objective class characteristics imply. The strongest effect among the control variables is for age, and Pakulski does not address it as an important competing identity.

The third hypothesis refers to variation in class effects across subpopulations. The logic is that some identities are strong enough to override objective class. If true, that would show up as a weaker relationship between objective and subjective class for groups with strong identities. Table 4 compares all employed adults 25 years old and over with four subpopulations defined by a strong competing identification: African Americans, southerners, parents, and religious Americans.²³ The African American population is the most distinct. Income differences are only about three-fourths as consequential for African Americans as for others and only advanced degrees affect blacks. Occupational distinctions are about 16 percent more important for African Americans (and southerners and religious people). In the other three subpopulations objective class is as strong or stronger as it is for all employed people taken together. Thus the long history of exclusion levels distinctions among African Americans but there is no evidence that other identities are strong enough to cancel class distinction. Even in the black population, class distinctions are strong and

75 percent, 90 percent and 95 percent are close to 1, 2, and 3 on the logit scale.

²³Employed includes full- and part-time work but excludes being on strike, furlough, paid or unpaid leave, etc. African American is based on the respondent's own assessment of his or her race. Southerners live in the Census Bureau's "South" region: MD, DC, VA, NC, SC, GA, FL, AL, MS, TN, KY, LA, AK, TX, and OK. Parents have at least one child of their own (of any age, not necessarily living at home), and religious people are those who answered "Yes" to the question "Are you a strong ___?" [where interviewers filled in the blank with person's religion or denomination.]

Table 4. Net Effects of Objective Variables on Subjective Social Class for All Employed Adults and for Select Subpopulations: Persons 25 Years and Older

<i>Class variable</i>	<i>Subpopulation</i>				
	Employed	African American	Southern	Parent	Religious
<u>Family Income (ratio scale)</u>					
Main	1.253*	.750*	1.006*	1.110*	1.171*
Topcode	-.036	-.157	.281	.368*	.350*
<u>Occupation^a</u>					
Professional I	.714	.801	.826	.678	.754
Professional II	.022	.021	.022	.019	.014
Manager	.264	.294	.306	.255	.223
Other white-collar	-.056	-.064	-.063	-.057	-.077
Self-employed, white-collar	.370	.443	.444	.375	.606
Self-employed, blue-collar	-.168	-.176	-.194	-.164	-.181
Skilled blue-collar	-.487	-.559	-.573	-.465	-.307
Unskilled blue-collar	-.391	-.431	-.457	-.385	-.446
Low-wage service	-.146	-.205	-.176	-.141	-.226
Farm	-.123	-.125	-.134	-.116	-.359
κ	.343*	.389*	.400*	.331*	.387*
<u>Education</u>					
Main	.298*	-.187	.328*	.370*	.324*
Advanced degree	.335*	.925*	.411*	.253	.467*
<i>Number of cases</i>	4,279	549	1,524	3,103	1,469

*Statistically significant at conventional level ($p < .05$).

Note: The other variables in each model are racial ancestry, gender, marital status, parenthood, age, region, religion, and attendance at religious services.

^aDue to norming, standard errors for separate occupational groups are not available.

Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004.

significant; the effects of income and education are just weaker for African Americans.

The last hypothesis addresses change over time. Presumably the post-class changes are relatively recent so we should see them emerge over time. In fact, the opposite occurred; racial and other disparities in subjective class identification declined since the seventies while the effect of income increased. Table 5 shows income coefficients for all GSS years combined and for each decade. The effect of family income on middle and upper class identification is 42 percent greater in the current decade than it was in the 1970s.²⁴

²⁴Technical issues make comparing logistic regression coefficients difficult. The fundamental underidentification of the logit model makes it impossible to isolate the effect of changing variance in underlying class identification from

Table 5. Net Effects of Objective Variables on Subjective Social Class for All Years and by Decade: Employed, 25 Years and Older

<i>Class variable</i>	<i>All years</i>	<i>Decade</i>			
		1973-1978	1980-1989	1990-1998	2000-2004
<i>Family Income (ratio scale)</i>					
Main	1.055* (.043)	.885* (.103)	1.089* (.072)	1.031* (.081)	1.255* (.087)
Topcode	.164* (.080)	.104 (.198)	.223 (.132)	.181 (.148)	-.034 (.179)
<i>Number of cases</i>	21,142	3,508	6,530	6,824	4,279

*Statistically significant at conventional level ($p < .05$).

Note: The other variables in each model are education, occupation, employment status racial ancestry, gender, marital status, parenthood, age, region, religion, attendance at religious services, and decade.

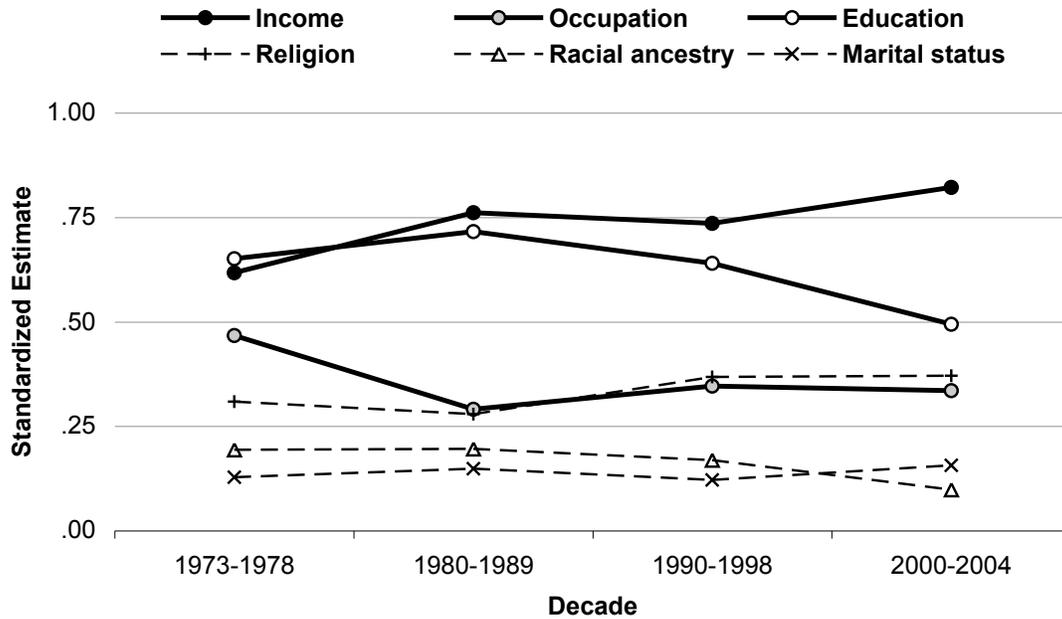
Source: General Social Survey, 1973-2004.

The rising effect of income was somewhat offset by falling effects of occupation (between the 1970s and 1980s) and education (since the 1990s). Figure 5 shows κ values (the standardized index introduced before) for each decade. According to this metric the income effect rose 33 percent while the occupation and education effects fell by 28 and 24 percent, respectively. The effect of racial ancestry, barely significant in the 1970s, was only half as big by 2004 (and no longer statistically significant). The effects of marital status and religion are not as strong as those of income and education, nor did they change significantly since the 1970s.

Thus, although the relative weights of income, occupation, and education shifted over the last thirty years, they remain the most important factors in class identification. In terms of the balance between sociological conceptions of class as the source of livelihood and economic ideas about the efficacy of money itself, money is clearly the factor on the rise. The myriad changes over the last thirty years make it hard to say what has recalibrated the class equation in favor of income. Two candidates come to mind. First, the decline of public goods may have put more families on their own account, as it were. That is with fewer public goods to share, families now buy for themselves

change in the impact of income. It could be that the effect of income was constant but the latent variance of class identification decreased by forty percent. That seems unlikely on its face since the 1970s to the present decade has been a time of rising inequality, not falling. If it is nonetheless true that the latent variance decreased then it would proportionally affect all other variables in the equation as well. That would make the flat lines in Figure 5 incline downward and the downward sloping lines even steeper.

Figure 5. Estimated Effects of Education, Occupation, Family Income, Religion, Racial Ancestry, and Marital Status on Middle-class Identification by Year: Employed, 25 Years and Older



Note: Standardized estimates are κ values for regression coefficients in the appendix table.
 Source: Statistical model using data from General Social Survey, 1973-2004.

the goods and services they desire. I have in mind here issues like private security services, private educations, and private transportation. Second, employment security and substandard employment (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000) may be undermining the efficacy of occupation as a feature of identity. If more people are underemployed or at least think they are, then they may identify with a job they no longer (or do not yet) hold.

Lifestyle, Attitudes, and Well-Being

The final criterion for gauging the relevance of subjective social class is its consequences. Causal claims are beyond the scope of this inquiry, but the cross-sectional survey data in the GSS can establish some interesting associations. Mostly I view class as the independent variable and the others as dependent variables in the discussion, except for homeownership which I see as contributing to the subjective class identity not following from it. I begin with lifestyle because it is

most relevant to figuring out how class works. Then I move on to political behaviors and attitudes, confidence in institutions, world view, and subjective well-being. The results are in Table 6.

Lifestyle and subjective social class

The cornerstone of the middle-class lifestyle is homeownership, especially from the working man's point of view (Halle 1984). Homeownership hovered at around 63 percent of American households from 1965 to 1990 then rose five percentage points to 68 percent by 2005 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 2006, Table 14). The GSS estimated 66 percent of people 25 years old and over owned their place of residence in 2000-2004. Middle-class homeownership (72 percent) was 15 percentage points higher than that of the working class (57 percent) and 33 percentage points higher than lower-class homeownership (39 percent).

The language parents use to talk to their children and how much talk there is has become an important issue in class analysis, thanks to Annette Lareau's (2003) *Unequal Childhoods*. In 1990, the GSS asked a question that taps into these concerns: "A child should never be allowed to talk back to his parents, or else he will lose respect for them." Working- (64 percent) and lower-class (63 percent) adults were significantly more likely to agree with this proposition than middle- (52 percent) and upper-class (36 percent) adults are.²⁵

Class goes with musical taste and leisure pursuits in most rich countries (Katz-Gerro 2002). For Americans, hunting, fishing, going to auto races, and listening to country music were working-class pursuits and preferences; classical music was a middle- and upper-class preference. The differences in the first half of this decade were modest – all these things were done or preferred by less than half of all classes – but statistically significant.

Class politics deserves a whole chapter of its own (see Manza and Brooks this volume). But a couple of contrasts show that subjective class differences mirror objective ones. The biggest difference between middle-class and working-class Americans was in voter turnout (17 percentage points). The partisan divide was greatest in Republican identification (10 points). Bush's margin in 2000 (6 points) would have been larger were it not for the abortion issue; middle-class Americans supported legal abortion more than working-class Americans did, holding down class voting.

²⁵The differences were as big for non-parents as for parents.

Table 6: Selected Attitudes and Behaviors by Subjective Social Class, Persons 25 Years Old and Over

	<i>Subjective Social Class</i>				
	Lower	Working	Middle	Upper	Middle - Working
A. Lifestyle					
Own home	39%	57%	72%	74%	15%
Talking back to parents lead to disrepect (1990)	63%	64%	52%	36%	-12%
Went hunting or fishing (1993)	36%	41%	30%	33%	-12%
Went to auto race (1993)	10%	22%	10%	10%	-11%
Went to classical concert (1993)	5%	11%	23%	39%	11%
Country music: like very much (1993)	30%	29%	19%	19%	-10%
Classical music: like very much (1993)	9%	14%	22%	46%	8%
B. Politics					
Voted in 2000	37%	55%	73%	87%	17%
Voted for Bush	34%	50%	56%	57%	6%
Republican identification	14%	23%	33%	42%	10%
Independent identifaciton	46%	42%	34%	29%	-8%
Democratic identification	40%	35%	33%	29%	-2%
Support legal abortion (6 of 6 items)	27%	29%	40%	42%	11%
C. Spending (Government in Washington spends too little on:)					
Social Security	75%	69%	56%	45%	-13%
Halting rising crime rate	64%	64%	54%	51%	-9%
Child care	70%	64%	56%	60%	-8%
Improving nation's health	80%	78%	73%	71%	-4%
Mass transit	38%	33%	41%	51%	7%
D. Redisribution					
Differences in income too large (1996, 2000)	74%	72%	63%	47%	-9%
Government: no action on inequality	11%	17%	26%	39%	9%
Government: redistribute incomes	52%	30%	25%	17%	-5%
Government should reduce income gap (1990-1996)	53%	34%	26%	17%	-9%
Taxes on the rich are too low (1996)	61%	42%	37%	12%	-5%
Companies: profits to workers then investors (1991)	90%	88%	74%	59%	-13%
OK if some get rich (1993)	54%	55%	61%	72%	6%
E. Confidence in institutions					
Labor unions	13%	15%	12%	15%	-3%
Banks	21%	24%	32%	36%	8%
Major companies	14%	19%	28%	45%	10%
Scientific community	30%	38%	49%	54%	11%
F. World view					
World is good (2000, 2002)	16%	30%	36%	45%	6%
People helpful	35%	42%	53%	55%	12%
People try to be fair	32%	44%	61%	57%	17%
People can be trusted	14%	30%	43%	38%	13%
G. Well-being					
Very happy	16%	28%	37%	42%	9%
Health excellent	11%	25%	37%	48%	12%
Very satisfied with work	30%	44%	54%	60%	10%
Satisfied with finances	9%	19%	43%	58%	24%
Standard of living will improve	48%	67%	76%	81%	9%

Source: General Social Survey, 2000-2004 except where noted.

Most social spending issues did not split along class lines, but there were five issues with significant class differences. The largest was Social Security. Three-fourths of the lower class (75 percent), 69 percent of the working class, 56 percent of the middle class, and 45 percent of the upper class supported spending more on Social Security. The working class supported more spending for halting the rising crime rate,²⁶ child care, and improving the nation's health. The middle class favored more spending for mass transit (even though the lower class was most likely to use it).

In 1996 and again in 2000, the GSS asked whether "income differences . . . are too large." A majority of Americans agreed they were: 74, 72, 63, and 47 percent of the lower, working, middle, and upper class, respectively. The GSS asks a complicated question about whether the government should do something about inequality:

Some people think that the government in Washington ought to reduce the income differences between the rich and the poor, perhaps by raising the taxes of wealthy families or by giving income assistance to the poor. Others think that the government should not concern itself with reducing this income difference between the rich and the poor.

Here is a card with a scale from 1 to 7. Think of a score of 1 as meaning that the government ought to reduce the income differences between rich and poor, and a score of 7 meaning that the government should not concern itself with reducing income differences. What score between 1 and 7 comes closest to the way you feel?

Middle- (26 percent) and upper-class (39 percent) adults favored no government action significantly more than working- (17 percent) and lower-class (11 percent) adults did. At the other end of the scale, 52 percent of lower- and 30 percent of middle-class adults chose the strongest government action position as compared to 25 percent of middle- and 17 percent of upper-class people. Average scores on the seven-point scale (with "government should not concern itself" equal to seven) by class were 2.8, 3.6, 4.0, and 4.8 for the lower, working, middle, and upper classes, respectively. Asked more simply in 1990-1996, "It is the responsibility of the government to reduce the differences in income between people with high incomes and those with low incomes," the

²⁶That is the premise of the question even though the crime rate does not actually rise every year.

class gap was similar. The idea of raising taxes on the rich was popular among the lower class, but even the working class is skeptical about raising taxes on anyone.

Classes also divided sharply over what profitable companies should do with their money. The 1991 GSS posed the proposition: “Corporations should pay more of their profits to workers and less to shareholders.” A majority of Americans of all class agreed, surprisingly. The margin of agreement fell as class rose: 90 percent of lower- and 88 percent of working-class people agreed, 74 percent of middle-class people did, and even 59 percent of the upper class agreed.

In 1993, the GSS asked a normative question about inequality: “People should be allowed to accumulate as much wealth as they can even if some make millions while others live in poverty.” The majority of all classes supported that principle, and it differed only modestly (but significantly) by class.

The low ebb of confidence in labor unions has even spread to the lower and working classes. The GSS asks about confidence in “people running” a number of major institutions, including labor unions. Classes did not differ significantly from the overall average of 14 percent having “a great deal” of confidence in labor leaders, though, presumably, the reason why they lack confidence might differ by class. Confidence in the people running banks, major companies, and the scientific community rose significantly with rising social class.

The GSS asked people about their view of the world and human nature over many years.²⁷ The longest-running question was:

Where would you place yourself on a scale from one to seven where one means “The world is basically filled with evil and sin” and seven means “There is much goodness in the world that hints at God’s goodness.”

Lower- and working-class Americans saw more sin and less goodness than middle- and upper-class people did. Among people with no religious preference the answers are mostly similar, but the working class gave significantly less sanguine answers (only 23 percent of working-class unchurched Americans said the world is good). The lower and working classes also took a more dyspeptic view of human interaction. Significantly fewer lower- and working-class people viewed

²⁷Most questions were discontinued after the 1994 survey; one was included in the 1996-2002 surveys.

people as helpful, fair, or trustworthy. The working and middle classes were farthest apart on whether people try to be fair.

Income increases happiness (Hout 2003); these results show that happiness rose with subjective class, too; 9 percent more middle- than working-class people were very happy. Subjective health also improved with social class status – from 11 percent excellent among the lower class to 25 percent for the working class to 37 percent of the middle class and 48 percent of the upper class. The majority of the lower and working classes were not satisfied with their work while the majority of the middle and upper classes were satisfied. Satisfaction with finances rose steadily with class from 9 percent to 19 percent to 43 percent to 58 percent very satisfied among the lower, working, middle, and upper classes. Yet majorities of all but the lower class were optimistic about the prospect of their standard of living improving. Apparently the sky is the limit though, as the tendency to see improvement in the future was greatest for those already at the top.

This canvass of behaviors and attitudes identified 36 items on which subjective social class was a statistically significant divider.²⁸ The difference between the middle and working classes ranged from just 4 percent on health-care spending to 24 points on satisfaction with family finances. Finding that subjective social class matters for such a broad range of socially meaningful distinctions implies that subjective social class is itself socially meaningful. Some of the differences can be explained using multivariate models and a list of objective class factors (most notably income, occupation, and education); others cannot. But the simple differences here strengthen the case that class in general and subjective social class in particular organize Americans' sense of their place in society and constrain their behavior, interests, and attitudes.

Conclusions

Class works as an expression of people's sense of where they fit in the rank order from privilege to poverty in America. Nearly every American recognizes social class terms. Most use ranking terms that do not necessarily include "working class" when they are not prompted by interviewers, yet they know what surveys mean if the proffered categories include it. Most significantly, Americans

²⁸Table 6 shows 38 items. The class differences are not statistically significant for Democratic party identification and confidence in people running unions.

are familiar enough with class terminology to place themselves more or less where experts would put them in the upper, middle, working, and lower class scheme that most surveys offer them.

About one American in three does not have a clear objective class position. For some, inconsistencies among their income, occupation, and education give them mixed class signals. Objective indicators have gotten more consistent in the last twenty years, but income, occupation, and education are still only somewhat correlated. For others, their objective class combines middle class and working class features in one job. Mixed-class households in which one adult holds a working-class job and another does middle-class work further complicate people's task of placing themselves, as most people feel some constraint to assign one subjective class to the whole family.²⁹ Further complicating matters, class borders are vague. Respondent and analyst alike have difficulty saying precisely where the middle-class / working-class line is. Nonetheless, class ambivalence and class ambiguity do not mean that subjective class is a bad concept.

These and other patterns reported here support the conclusion that "class counts." Most of the data here replicates, using the 2000-2004 GSS, patterns found in older GSSs, in Wright (1997), and other data sets (e.g., Hodge and Treiman 1968; Jackman and Jackman 1983). My contribution is to update and reframe some very general empirical regularities. Among my novel findings are the way objective class indicators explain differences in subjective social class among important segments of the population. Lower incomes and more blue-collar jobs explain why African Americans identified more with the working class, just as higher incomes and more education explain why married and religious people were more middle class. But other things, notably age, homeownership, and union membership, remain important factors in subjective class identification, even after statistically controlling for income, occupation, and education. Thus, even though my results are a bitter pill for those who deny class, they may challenge some class analysts, too.

Post-class speculations fare the worst in this analysis. None of the changes that supposedly made the current era different from the 1970s actually occurred. In fact, the trend to greater inequality and the growing links between education and income, education and residence, and education and marriage (see Fischer and Hout 2006 for evidence on all three), intensified the re-

²⁹We do not have enough evidence on this interesting subject but what we have is consistent with this idea (see Baxter 1994).

relationships among objective class indicators and resolved some subjective class ambiguities over the last thirty or so years. There is no evidence that competing identities rival class in peoples' calculus of where they go in the society's order.

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Detailed Tables