

THE INVISIBLE ISM

We are a nation born of idealism as well as the desire to abolish near-absolute class differences in particular. In America the fact of distinct classes is a contradiction of our basic value of equality of opportunity. Perhaps that is why it is so hard for Americans to admit we even live in a society that is divided into different classes, or to see how drastically class divisions have increased over the last thirty years.

Class can be broken down into more subtle categories within both the working and middle classes (Labov 1970; Yanneman and Cannon 1987; Fustell 1992; Lareau and Conley 2009). There are significant differences between, say, the lower and upper middle class, just as there are between the upper and lower working class—or between the working and poverty classes. These distinctions are beyond the scope of this chapter, and to a large extent, this book. I prefer a vernacular approach to defining class in America: rich, middle class, working class, and poor, though some very good arguments have been made for other definitions, for example: capitalist class, middle class, and working class (Metzgar 2005; Zweig 2005, quoted in Russo and Linkon 2005).

The kind of cultural differences and societal injuries I describe in this book are true for people within the broader categories of working and middle classes. In other words, I am favoring a *categorical* use of the terms working class and middle class, rather than a *gradational* or socioeconomic status one. I believe class-related family and cultural practices clearly cohere into foundational psychological patterns within these categories (Lareau 2003; Lareau and Conley 2008; Torlina 2011).

For individuals looking to define class in their lives or backgrounds, I favor definitions that are based on, though not necessarily limited to, lived experience and common sense. For my purposes, working class people work at manual labor, with both their heads and hands, and middle class people work mainly with symbols, mental products, and processes. In preparing for this book I interviewed my father's siblings on their work histories and thoughts about class. Every one of them identified skill as working class when given a choice between working class and middle class. Education is also a class indicator as, after high school, most working class people do not obtain a college education but, rather, go to trade or tech schools, no schools, or to community colleges. In middle class life, getting at least a four-year college degree is expected (and saved for), and it matters a lot whether one goes to the “best” schools, best being defined by how much prestige the school has in the work world.

Let me be clear: I believe economic power, not culture, is the spine of class in the United States—what holds it up and in place. In 2007, the wealthiest ten percent of households owned 73.1 percent of all household wealth in America (Zweig 2012). While this book is about cultural divisions, it would be entirely missing the forest for the trees to ignore the economic conditions that produce and reproduce class in America. If culture is the medium through which class inequality is recreated—the arms, hands, and legs of class—it is still economic power that is its spinal column—the core of class in America. Nor are class divisions static; they are dynamic “living fighting entities,” and the borders and boundaries between all four classes change with the times (Zweig 2005, from Linkon and Russo 2005). The top 20 percent of the U.S. population in terms of wealth gained about 89 percent of the wealth created by our nation between 1983 and 2007; the remaining 80 percent of households gained just 11 percent of that wealth (Zweig 2012).

The upper fifth of the population (by wealth) increased its net worth by some 70 percent from 1970 to 1995, according to economist Michael Zweig

(2000), and the greatest portion of that wealth went to the top 1 percent. In 1983 the wealthiest 1 percent had an average net worth of \$9.1 million (adjusted for inflation); by 2007, the average had more than doubled to \$18.5 million. At the same time the bottom 40 percent of households saw their average net worth drop by 62 percent, and their indebtedness, excluding homes, increased by 160 percent as they scrambled to make ends meet on an average annual income of \$20,200 in 2006 (Zweig 2012). That is all to say that there has been an enormous redistribution of wealth in the United States since the years when I was growing up in my stable working class community. The top 1 percent of the population in terms of wealth collectively received 1.35 trillion dollars in 2006, according to Robert Frank (2007, 3), more than the entire economies of France, Canada, or Italy. Then our top-heavy economy started to fall apart.

Knowledge about the inner life of class should not replace or be disconnected from knowledge of the very concrete and drastic inequality that class itself creates in America. Economic power, and the social control it can buy, is very real. In the early years of the twenty-first century class has heaped enormous rewards on people who do certain kinds of work: professional, corporate/managerial, and especially the upper, or capitalist, class. Others have to fight just to see a doctor or get an education, while in other civilized (and less wealthy) nations these things are offered to all citizens as basic rights. The economic fact that most working class people have had lower wages for four decades, which has led to significantly more inequality than when I was young, is crucial to understanding working class experience today.

Even so, it is a mistake to reduce working class experience to nothing but jobs and justice. A small, ordinary example of power in cultural action is found in Sennett and Cobb's *The Hidden Injuries of Class* (1972), in which they describe two men, a construction worker and a schoolteacher. They were next-door neighbors, friendly, and their incomes were roughly the same. Nevertheless, the schoolteacher called the construction worker by his first name and the construction worker called his neighbor "mister." In our larger society, the dominant (middle class) culture awards far more status and money, for example, to middle class work and individuals who demonstrate outstanding verbal or mathematical ability, while it ignores or vilifies those who do manual labor and come from traditional communities of care and deep life-long connections (emotional intelligence).

Class is an injustice that says some Americans deserve much more time, leisure, control, and far more financial reward than others. *Classism* is the set of myths and beliefs that keep those class divisions intact, that is, the belief that working class cultures and people are inherently inferior and that class itself demonstrates who the hardest workers and the rightful winners are. My concern in this book is to highlight how culture plays into class, and especially *classism*. By "culture" I mean a constellation of accepted values, customs, mores, attitudes, styles, behaviors, and especially, worldview—the shared *unconscious mind* of a community; to put it in psychological terms.

Class-Based Cultures

Cultures are the medium through which class inequality manifests itself. To give you an example of how culture works, I offer a story that illustrates my particular region's divisions based on class and culture. These specifics are not intended to be universal, as working class cultures vary greatly by region, ethnicity, gender, race, and other factors (though, as we will see, they do share some fundamental factors).

I went to two Lutheran confirmation celebrations in the late 1990s—same day, same town, same white clapboard country church. Though living only a few miles from each other, the two families were worlds apart. One of the two girls was working class, one middle class, though the single mothers throwing the parties, an executive secretary and a nurse, earned roughly the same amount of money. Two Lutheran confirmation parties with two different social meanings.

At the working class celebration, my aunts and uncles and most of my cousins and their spouses showed up, as they do for most of our many family events. When I arrived, my cousin Linda shouted across the living room, where the aunts and other women were visiting, "Hey Sunshine! You finally got out of bed and decided to grace us with your presence!" She laughed her great big laugh, traversed the tangle of people, and gave me her bear hug.

"Nice to see you, too!" I retorted and made my way into the room hugging various aunts and cousins. Everyone was complimenting the hostess on her new split-level house she had bought with a divorce settlement. It was large, had a new deck in back, and a prominent beer stein collection

above the kitchen cupboards. The women were dressed in slacks or newer jeans. They wore casual knit cotton-poly tops that had big flowers and other patterns on them. They wore clean tennis shoes or other comfortable shoes. Their hair was generally curled, some in tight home permanents. Voices were often raised in exclamation. We were all "catching up," and sometimes the noise level got too high to hear well. People frequently called out across the room to one another.

Though the men were mostly gathered in the large clean garage, they traipsed through the living room and kitchen regularly to get food and drinks. Cousin Linda and I called out mouthy comments to them as they passed. They wore jeans or comfortable cotton pants, casual button-down shirts; my dad and big brother wore silver bolo ties and belts with large silver buckles. We ate tuna-noodle salad from a big Tupperware bowl, canned baked beans from a Crock-Pot, and a tossed-fruit salad. The hostess made white-bun sandwiches with presliced ham and Miracle Whip on the spot. Other women also took turns at this task. People were told to help themselves to Kool-Aid, soda pop, or coffee. All through the house, people hugged, laughed, and greeted each other with much affection. The crowd was all family except for the honored girl's closest friends.

Very little attention was paid to the fifteen-year-old girl who had been confirmed, aside from initial greetings and cards with checks in them. She spent most of her time downstairs in the lower half of this new split-level house, sprawled on her boyfriend's lap watching TV with her siblings, friends, and some younger members of the extended family, occasionally going outside to smoke cigarettes. Separate spaces for adults and young people is typical in my family. The others also stared at the screen, though they talked freely and loudly. The confirmed girl was the only one there in a dress. The most common comment made to her was on her dress and how pretty she looked. To which the girl kind of apologized, pulled uncomfortably at the hem and said she felt "weird in it," that she had just bought it the day before, that she never wears dresses.

People were there to "pay respects" and to visit with one another; the checks in the cards were important, something kids in my family count on. I didn't hear anyone ask the girl who had been confirmed anything about her confirmation. It was an expected Lutheran tradition; we all understood it as an accomplishment signaling her movement toward adulthood. All were relieved that she had managed to do it—a couple years

behind schedule—after a few years of trouble that followed her parents' divorce and led to her being placed in a foster home for a while. All family events are yet another opportunity for a reunion. At one point I asked her, privately, how she felt about being confirmed. She said, "It took long enough!" and went on to say she was just glad that she finally did it, but she felt embarrassed it took so long. Uncharacteristically, she spoke frankly about herself for a while with me. I felt soft with love for her and grateful she opened up and we connected, as I hadn't seen her for quite a while. I was impressed with her ability to both know and express her inner life.

At the other confirmation party, that of a middle class friend's daughter, a few miles away, the hostess warmly greeted me at the door. This mother's much smaller townhouse was decorated with framed posters of paintings by Miró and Modigliani, hand-painted stenciling along the ceiling, and antique furniture. The first things I noticed on arrival were how quietly everyone here spoke and the absence of laughter. People talked in small mixed-gender groups or pairs, smiled a lot and chuckled occasionally but did not laugh out loud. There were no separate places for men and women; there were no separate places for children and adults. These women generally wore midcalf-length dresses or skirts of linen, silk, or rayon. The outfits were muted solid colors with the occasional tiny pattern. Some women wore "suits" of slacks and matching blouses. Hair was loosely curled or it was short and sharply cut. I was dressed and coiffed like these women. Most of the men wore jackets and some wore ties; they wore good slacks; many wore pullover knit tops; the ones with ties wore fancy button-down oxford shirts. No one wore jeans. Everyone wore leather shoes.

In this celebration the girl who had been confirmed was at the center of the living room and the day. She had made several art projects for people to view, including a small "tree" with pictures of her at various ages and a scrapbook with photographs of her and various attendees at her celebration. These were her family members, but also other adults who had been important in her life. Sitting in the living room with the adults, she rose and greeted people as they came in, showing them their photographs in her book. She encouraged people to write their names in a guest book so that she could keep track of who had attended her celebration and send thank you cards. I don't remember seeing any of her peers there.

We ate quiche, a creative version of scalloped potatoes, and wedges of freshly baked ham kept in a warming server. The fruit was sliced and

arranged in a lovely pattern on an elegant serving plate. There was a delicious punch the hostess had invented that day, served in a glass punch bowl, along with freshly brewed coffee. In one room sat an artist who had been hired to do caricature portraits as a party novelty.

When I asked this girl what the day meant to her, it was clear she had already spent time thinking and talking about it. "I think of it as a re-statement of my baptismal vows," she replied. She went on to explain that those vows had been made *for* her as an infant, but now she was "an adult in the eyes of the Church, and I am able to make that commitment for myself." When complimented on her dress, she replied "thank you" and smiled, though she was not any more prone to wearing dresses than the other girl. I was impressed with this young woman's keen intellect.

These two teen-aged Lutheran girls from Minnesota were raised with different expectations in different cultures. Understanding the role of culture in class-based differences allowed me to enjoy each party in its own right. Each celebration felt normal and right to the people who attended it, and they would likely feel uncomfortable at the other one. We learn our core values and sense of what is proper behavior (who we are and what life is for) from our immediate influences (family, neighborhood, ethnic group). Each confirmation meant the girl was on her way to adulthood, but each has a very different idea of what that "adulthood" should look like.

Since both parties had mostly Scandinavian Americans in attendance, holding ethnicity constant, they are useful for seeing class as culture. Because of my odd ethnic heritage, I can tell you that all Minnesota Scandinavians are quiet compared with New York Jews, but when compared with other people of Scandinavian descent, the working class folks were quite a bit louder than the middle class ones. The trick is to be able to identify cultural differences in *their own context*, instead of merely assuming the superiority of the one that is most familiar.

In this story, the girls' abilities point to the different unconscious en-phases of their cultures: the first girl's psychological ability to open up emotionally and connect, her genuineness and lack of personal defense versus the other girl's intellectual ability to conceptualize, articulate, and present the meaning of the event. Both girls were smart and sensitive; I feel each of them was capable of either response. The cultural difference is in which kind of response first "came naturally" (Adlam, Turner, and Lineker 1977).

Style and general attitude differences are obvious in the story, and while they may not apply well to some ethnic groups or regions, they point to differences in values that may occur across ethnicities and geography. In the middle classes some amount of "self-actualization" is expected, and individual accomplishment is admired. Community generally trumps individuality in the working class; being a show off might make others "feel bad," and how you treat others is more important than being a winner.

The story shows many opposing values: tradition versus distinction—the same Kool-Aid and tuna-noodle hot dishes show up at every reunion; extroverted personal warmth and intimacy versus emotional reserve and friendly politeness; conversation about the intimate details of people's lives (the women) and things or activities, especially cars and fishing (the men), versus discussion of ideas and one's special activities—achievements, awards, travel; the importance of being able to just hang out and feel comfortable together versus individual verbal ability and intellectual sparring; hanging out to "see what happens" versus structured activities.

Middle class and working class cultures are not wholly separate categories but are rather like clouds of culture—of learned styles, behaviors, and values—that overlap in the larger sky of American society. But the sun in that sky shines much more brightly on middle class culture, highlighting it and leaving working class cultures largely in shadow. Both cultures share many features of American society in general, but beneath those veneers lay worlds of difference. Each arises from a different worldview, each produce differences in who people are—in how they think and speak, in how they regard themselves and the world around them, in what they consider normal and good manners.

The different expectations in these two Lutheran settings move from class *difference* to *classism* only with the assumption that the middle class setting is superior, when working class cultures are judged harshly by standards that are not their own. In our larger society this is often the case, especially in crucial avenues of access to success in adulthood: schools and workplaces.

What Is Classism?

In *The Hidden Injuries of Class*, Sennett and Cobb stepped back in history a couple hundred years to find a stark illustration of class prejudice:

In a letter to a friend, Madame de Sevigne writes about a hanging she witnessed one morning. It was striking, she records, to see the condemned man trembling during the preliminaries of the execution when he was only a common peasant. He groaned and wailed incessantly, causing some amusement to the ladies and gentlemen who came to see the spectacle; once hoisted up, his body wriggling in a noose, he presented, Madame de Sevigne remarked, "a most remarkable sight." . . . Yet Madame de Sevigne was not a vicious woman by the standards of the late seventeenth century. She, like other aristocrats of her circle, could view hangings with disinterested fascination, because the person being killed was a creature whose inner nature had little relation to her own. (246-47)

In this snapshot of classism, we find the stark skeleton of class-based prejudice that has survived into our historical moment in a more muted and subtle form. Classism in America is based on the assumption of the superiority of middle (and upper) class styles, tastes, attitudes, and values. *Everyone* is taught in school which ones are the "good" manners, "proper" English, the "good" schools, the "best" occupations. Everyone sees the movies and other media telling which are the "normal" people. The assumption that professional and managerial advancement is the measure of human worth is hammered at all of us from virtually every major social institution. Classism delivers its harsh judgments on working class styles, values, and behaviors. These features are seen as having "no class," or being subnormal, by middle class people, but they are really threads in a larger fabric of working class culture.

Classism has been the single most destructive psychological factor in my process of crossing, then straddling, classes. At the heart of the invisible passage from one world to another is the assumption, everywhere in the middle class, that working class life is simply inferior in all ways. This is classism. Classism is psychologically destructive to people because, once internalized, it can result in a profoundly divided self, the loss of life-long family and community ties, and/or a confusing present where one feels "nowhere at home" (Ryan and Sackrey 1996). It is equally destructive to American society at large because it divides well-meaning Americans, working class and middle class folks, needlessly from each other. It also keeps them from recognizing that together they make up the vast majority in this country, and that middle class and working class people have much more in common, at least economically, than either have with the upper, or capitalist, class.

I want to flag some of the varying forms classism takes, as *cruelty* is only one of these forms. Class-based cruelty, though nowhere near the level of Madame Sevigne's time and aristocratic class, survives to this day. In the early 1930s, kids at school made fun of my father for his ragged clothes and shoes and, when he got angry at them, they forced him to sit in an "electric chair" of thorns and other painful items. In 2004, Alfred Lubrano wrote about privileged students at Ivy League colleges who held coins to a flame and then dropped them from a second-story window onto the sidewalk below, laughing at the scholarship students who walked by and tried to pick up the hot coins. In 2007, "sport killings" of homeless people hit the headlines, as did a popular computer game called *Bum Killing*. In 2011, the phrase "tea-tards" is gaining traction, describing the "retarded" "tea party" sympathies of some—a magnified minority—working class folks.

But the most common form of classism is *solipsism* or my-world-is-the-whole-world, what I call class-blindness. This is the tendency to assume everyone has had the same experience we have had and to be blind to the experiences of people unlike ourselves. "We made fun of them, the people who lived in those tacky, ugly, little trailers. We said, 'Who would want to live in a metal box?'" a middle class classism workshop participant confided with remorse. "We didn't understand they couldn't afford houses like ours." Middle class people often disdain or make fun of working class people's styles and behaviors as if we were all raised the very same way and these individuals just don't get it. Societywide institutions, like public education, do the same thing: presume we all think and learn like middle class people do, that we all work best as individuals in competition. American education then punishes kids who have not learned to work best this way. *Solipsism* is often accompanied by *judgments of taste*: another form of classism. "Oh my God, she had plastic flowers and the couch was orange plaid! Plastic flowers are so tacky. She had no class at all," a counseling client said of her new mother-in-law when they first met, as if a few style indicators said everything there was to know about her mother-in-law. "He was a real Archie Bunker type, you know, a redneck racist pig," another client once said when he first met his adult older brother, who had been given up for adoption as a baby by his teenage mother. As it turned out, they had not discussed race at all. My white, college-educated client simply assumed this guy with a billed cap and nonstandard English must be a racist. As they got to know each other better he discovered that his brother

was actually engaged to an American Indian woman and was very close with her family.

Negative judgments and stereotypes of people who have working class styles, values, speech, and behavior serve to punish people for being raised within their own cultures (Bernstein 1971; Bourdieu 1984). But whose standards say that framed prints of paintings by Miró are inherently and absolutely more "tasteful" or "classier" than a beer stein collection? Or that orchestral music is more meaningful than rock 'n' roll or hip-hop? As many have argued regarding ethnic prejudice and racism, judging one culture by the standards of another (dis)misses real people and their real lives.

Classism is also societal or systemic domination, and this is the most complicated, and effective, method way of keeping working people at or near the bottom of the economic ladder. For example, responsible working class adults routinely have to ask permission to go to the toilet if the need arises before their mandated fifteen-minute break from work, or to bring in a note of proof if they take half a day off work to see a doctor. Other Americans, in the middle class, would never dream of having to ask, indeed, are not required to do more than tell someone they will be in late because of an outside appointment. Nor do middle class folks have to use a time clock to prove their hours at work. Nor would they be asked to give up 20 percent of their pay, two dollars subtracted from a once ten dollars-an-hour job, *less than they can afford to live on*, simply to give stockholders a few more pennies per share that quarter. In the last four decades millions and millions of working class people have lost their skilled-labor jobs altogether and have only been offered entry-level service jobs (like fast food) that pay minimum wage in return.

Systemic or structural classism is a sometimes deliberate, sometimes inadvertent, dehumanizing and bullying of working class people within institutions such as the workplace and in schools. This happens by way of systematic exclusion and control: the exercise of power over people who cannot afford to resist. Concretely, this involves threats to fire workers who complain about poor conditions, or, more broadly, punishment of working class students who do not conform to middle class cultural norms in American public schools, as I will examine in this book. Class is the concrete division of groups of Americans into varying levels of control and authority, and increasingly unequal reward for different kinds of work. But again, the *medium* of this control, or *how it works*, is through cultural

mediums in everyday life (school and work). Nowhere is this as clear as in public education, the very system designed to produce greater equality of opportunity, perhaps our most cherished American value. Public schools enforce the exclusion and control of working class children through the routine use of middle class culture's assumptions and expectations, that is, expecting them to be from backgrounds other than their own.

That many middle class people believe their attitudes and styles are "normal" and that they tend to look down on working class people would not be a big deal if their class didn't run everything that creates image and policy in our society. Defining one's superiority in opposition to some "other" is hardly unique to the American middle and upper classes. Indeed, working class people and communities can also be stubbornly insular and have their own list of epithets for the middle class: eggheads, sissies, cold fish, pencil pushers, spoiled brats, and bloodsuckers are a few. Nor is classism (against those further down the class ladder) exclusive to the middle class.

But, as Barbara Ehrenreich has pointed out (1989), the professional-managerial middle class, by definition, selects and creates all the images and representations of society that everyone sees. Making movies, teaching, writing, publishing, radio, television—you name it—they are all *professional* jobs, and they define what is considered "cultured" and "normal" in the United States. Likewise, managers and managerial jobs, by definition, tell the rest of us what should and should not be done, said, and valued, at least at work.

Understanding classism is not about finding good guys and bad guys or the correct things to say or not say to working class people. Society, cultures, communities, family, and personality all shape what we think is right or wrong, as being "like me" or as "them." Still, despite our common, and very American, belief in human equality, classism is a powerful emotional experience. People feel fear, anger, disgust, revulsion, and even hatred toward other people they describe as "low class." And, sadly, classism can afflict "upwardly mobile" middle class folks originally from the working class, as much, sometimes more, than people born into relative privilege.

I have seen people on the receiving end cope with classism in a variety of ways: a reciprocal, generalized contempt for "rich people" or "yuppies" (by which they usually mean upper middle class people); a creeping

dislike for their own culture and a drive to climb the class ladder; sometimes a paralyzing jealousy and sense of powerlessness. Some purposely embrace everything that might upset middle (and some working) class people, reveling in "outlaw" status, or at least the image of it (bikers, hippies, gangstas). I have seen reactions to class prejudice range from a shrug of indifference to feelings of profound shame and rage. But for those who struggle their way into the middle class, encountering classism can lead to the silencing of one's internal voice—and the whole of one's childhood. That denial, in turn, can lead to serious psychological obstacles inside one's own head and heart.

Three Recipes for Classism

In *Money, Morals, and Manners* (1992) Michele Lamont investigated the values of 160 upper middle class white men (both American and French) and how they defined their own sense of superiority. I use this book now to better understand the core values and beliefs that fuel classism in America. The upper middle class, as defined by the salaries they command, makes up a relatively small percentage of the population (10–15%). While their numbers are not large, they are nonetheless powerfully influential in American society. "Their lives are held up as a model to the rest of the population by the mass media and the advertising industry. . . . [As] professors, consultants, architects, artists, advisors, psychologists and other 'makers of culture,' the ripples that issue from their powerful lives reach far and wide into American society" (xxiii). As business executives and managers, they have large numbers of people working with and for them.

Their responses clearly cohered into three different points of view or philosophies about their lives as winners in the American Dream and the nature of winning in the United States. Lamont's descriptions of attitudes and values in the upper middle class closely match my own observations as a counseling and community psychologist, as well as my personal experience as a middle class professional from the working class. In my extrapolation, these philosophies are three popular recipes for classism—three different ways to say, "I am better than they are." As we will see later, they arise from three different cultural *ways of becoming*, of self-actualizing, in middle class America. For all three groups the exclusion of

people who are not "my kind" was openly discussed without embarrassment or apology.

The people excluded by our boundaries are those with whom we refuse to associate and those toward whom rejection and aggression are showed, and distance openly marked, by way of insuring that "you understand that I am better than you are." (Lamont 1992, 10)

Cultural Classism

The idea of cultural superiority (and inferiority) is a long-standing feature in western European and American societies. *Culture*, in this usage, refers to the standards of "high culture," and has its roots in European aristocratic society, where Madame de Sevigne developed her view of the world. People unaware of "high culture" are often judged unfairly by those who have and value it. While inspiring some of our society's finest artistic, literary, and even humanitarian efforts, "high culture," and cultural classism, defines itself against "common" people and events. It is a ranking system whereby people, events, activities, and interests are considered "high" or "low" culture, or simply more or less "cultured"—synonymous with better and worse. It emphasizes family of origin, schools, and social standing, or, as an executive assistant friend of mine put it, "breeding, polish, and refinement." Cultural classism involves a host of harsh judgments of taste. This classism has no time for people with "tacky" or unoriginal clothing, furnishings, and art.

As Betsy Leonard-Wright put it in her 2005 book, *Class Matters*:

Few middle-class people would say we have prejudices against working-class or low-income people, of course. Our classism is often disguised in the form of disdain for Southerners or Midwesterners, religious people, patriotic people, employees of big corporations, fat or non-athletic people, [heterosexual] people with conventional gender presentation (feminine women wearing make-up; tough, burly guys), country music fans, or gun users. This disdain shows in our speech. (89)

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) popularized the term "cultural capital." His point was that presenting knowledge of high culture affords people respect and authority, as much, often more, than actual material wealth

does. Cultural capital is the amount of information, interest, and facility one has with high culture, as opposed to a snobbishly dismissed popular culture. The attitude toward people who do not appreciate high culture is expressed with witty contempt: "philistines," or "the great unwashed." They, like me at one time, were quick to say, "I don't watch television, I'm not interested in pop culture." Fascinating, erudite, edifying, and exquisite are other words I learned to use at that time. People born into, or aspiring toward, this category, generally consider themselves more evolved than other people.

This is solipsism, or the inability to see beyond one's own world. The unspoken assumption is that everyone could know these things but that some are too primitive or unevolved to want to know. This classism is fueled by ignorance. It doesn't understand that not everyone has the same access to this information and, more important, not everyone values high culture as they do. There are many kinds of cultures with different values. Coming from a family with many religious members, and who all love country music and grow up learning to use guns safely, I was an unlikely candidate for life among people who value cultural capital.

But then I came in through the back door, through the rebellious student counterculture in the late 1960s at the age of fourteen. I shared the counterculture's critique of its members' privileged lives. These students taught me to enjoy white wine, fine art, classical music, choreography, and Russian and German novelists writing about the meaning of life. I was fascinated with ideas and philosophy, and in my working class world, my new college student friends were part of my own rebellion. They lent me books. As a teenager, I was reading Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Hermann Hesse at night in my little twin bed in our tract house in Mounds View. I felt these authors spoke to my very soul, though I knew I didn't understand it all. I loved art, novelty, Beethoven, and all things creative.

Love of language propelled me further into this world. But this use of language—words where multiple, often ironic, meanings are intended; passages with various clever, high-culture references peppering the message—is for members of the supposed cultural elite alone. I loved this use of language when I found it, though as a young adult I only got about a quarter of the meanings. Even so I, in turn, used sophisticated language in an attempt to best my mother and big brother (who were, as usual, annoyingly unperturbed). Like the young adults in the movies *Breaking Away* and *My Brilliant Career*, I wanted "a life of the mind."

I also liked the antieestablishment students' liberal politics, their radical commitment to justice. They cared about class in economic and political terms, but in personal values and judgments, class was their great blind spot. They had contempt for real people from their idealized "working class." There I was, in a loving and large extended family with people who worked long, hard hours; I loved my family and knew them to be good and smart people. Eventually, my own life gave me a vantage point where I could see cultural classism as ignorant prejudice, even though, for a while, I fell prey to it.

Since this kind of classism is common, indeed is *currency*, in higher education, its reach is very long. Though fewer than a third of the Americans in Lamont's sample fell into this group, the rest of the upper middle class men she interviewed admitted they were most intimidated and insecure around the people and qualities of "high culture." I found an example of cultural classism on the Class Matters website: "I was eating lunch with a friend—someone who's proud to call herself a Massachusetts liberal—and the waitress got her order wrong. My friend treated the waitress just fine, but after she left the table, said to me, 'Well, if she was smart, she wouldn't be a waitress'" (Levison 2007).

William Pelz, a college teacher from the working class, had this to say about liberal arts:

The point is that, at least for the working class and the mass of common people throughout history, much of the liberal arts are not liberal at all. What they are, even if cloaked in politically correct rhetoric, is profoundly conservative—conservative because while they may question the "meaning in life" or even the "problem" of poverty, they flinch like a vampire in sunlight from a concrete examination of the sources of class oppression. (Quoted in Dewes and Law 1995, 283)

Moral Classism

In *Money, Morals, and Manners*, a second upper middle class group that cohered around a perceived superiority were those who defined themselves primarily in moral terms: both that their own hard work showed their moral character and by their moral commitment to use their privileges to help others. These men defined themselves (and their kind of people) by the intensity of their commitment to the powerful American "work

ethic." Hard work, in and of itself, was considered a sign of high moral character. They saw themselves as living proof of the American Dream, that good grades and enough hard work enable people to "get ahead" and earn more money and luxury than other (presumed lazier) people. They believed their own efforts earned them their creative pursuit of "the good life," and they felt they deserved it.

They were often the first or second generation in their family to be upper middle class and were generally proud that they judge people by certain personal qualities that they believe can be found in any class. These qualities included competence, honesty, ambition, dynamism, resilience, long-term planning, friendliness, and both the ability and willingness to work very long hours. They knew how to be team players (with the people on their side) but could also be highly competitive, aggressive, and hard-nosed with the competition. The men in this group believed that their superior command of these qualities, along with their moral commitment to hard work, was the reason they were nearer the top of the economic ladder.

Solipsism and class-based geographical separation from anyone not in the upper middle class fuel "moral" classism's belief that people who lack advantages are simply not working hard enough. Classism sneaks in with what they do *not* see: that their preferred human qualities are culturally cultivated within the middle class (and partially in some upwardly mobile working class families). Not all people are raised with an emphasis on individual achievement, ambition, and getting ahead. Not all people have entrepreneurial personalities, nor do all people value them. Thank goodness not all people are hard-drivers with skills that work in a competitive society but not necessarily in a cooperative one. Folks in this group may not see that some people come from cultures that consider individualism and competitiveness rude or wrong. People in this group may also not see the ways they were lucky. Moral classism does not see the fact that there are only so many positions near the top and that privilege rests on a large number of people who work for far less reward in far less personally meaningful work. They may say, "We worked hard, why can't you?"

But many people do work very hard and never get these privileges. The attitude that work, in and of itself, is good for us and that self-discipline and sacrifice build character is, of course, also held by many working class people. My father worked two jobs, built an addition onto our house, wired and plumbed it, fixed our cars, and helped anyone who ever asked

him for help. He was the hardest worker I have ever known. And I make ten times per hour what he made. Trust me when I say I know I am not as hard a worker as my dad was. Indeed, my father's tendency to work hard until the job was done, no matter the cost, indirectly inspired me to cross the class divide.

Judgments of taste combine with solipsism that extends the presumption of moral superiority to styles, values, and behaviors. Among those long on ambition but shorter on cultural capital, styles are conservative and described with words like tasteful, clean, and, especially, appropriate. Values about behavior match style factors: as colors are muted, so are voices, opinions, amusement, and anger, in favor of a friendly reserve. This classism harshly judges people who "put on a show" or have a "big mouth," people who come off "too strong" in style, opinions, food, or behavior. While these values may well serve those aspiring to power and fortune in America, many working class cultures put a premium on colorfulness, taking up space, and being real, rather than on reserve and diplomacy. Classism sees and judges louder, more expressive and emotional human behavior as flaws of personal character, which is called tasteless rather than customs of class or ethnic cultures.

Class and ethnicity affect people's attitudes about work and leisure. For me, and many in the American middle class, work is highly meaningful and integral to our lives and our sense of personal worth. But in my extended Jensen family, people's real lives are not necessarily what they do at work (though they work very hard jobs). In the oral work histories I conducted with my uncles and aunts for this book—I found out that most of them *work to live*. They are anything but lazy, but they see their jobs as allowing them to enjoy life.

For a reality check on the role of work in life, and the moral superiority of near-constant work, I need only walk my dog down my multiethnic working class Minneapolis street where I can usually find people hanging out on porches and in yards: Hmong, Chinese Americans, folks from Central and South America, blonde-haired Lutherans, aging counterculture types, African Americans, African immigrants, white punk rockers with pierced faces and tattoos, and, recently, the white, black, and mixed-race young adults who live collectively, plant gardens, and play with the kids in the neighborhood. People on my block hang out to chat, to enjoy the summer evening, to watch kids race down the sidewalk on scooters and

skateboards. They welcome me to shoot the breeze. On this evening, hurrying home to spend the night writing, I envy them their casual, spontaneous life that is very much like the working class world where I grew up. For middle class people like me, too often, work is our life. Not only is this lonelier, it leads to problems like workaholicism and emotional devastation if one loses one's job. These thoughts make it hard to finish my walk, ignore my neighbors, and get back to work.

Socioeconomic Classism

The third upper middle class group in Lamont's study was made up of men who described and defined themselves and their kind of people by their financial success. They believed that material success is an indicator of a person's value; worldly success is admired and achieved for its own sake. People in this group are likely to be first-generation upper middle class. They also valued ambition, hard work, competitiveness, and the drive to achieve, not for their own sake but for their result in visible success. They did not necessarily feel they owed society anything. This group lived in a dog-eat-dog survival-of-the-fittest world, a world of winners and losers. People's worth was judged by external status: professional prestige, financial standing, power, and visibility in prestigious social clubs, boards of directors, and the like. People who are unsuccessful in material terms are simply "losers." This form of classism disdains losers.

This classism dislikes people who do not look respectable, whatever that may mean in a certain community or region. People in this group believe money is the only means to freedom, control, and security. Admitting they strive for socioeconomic success for its own sake does not embarrass people who see themselves as simply being "more honest" than others. Many have worked their way up the class ladder and think others should do the same. Again, they assume that anyone can have, and would want, a hard-nosed, competitive personality, and they disregard the fact that there really are only so many slots near or at the top of the American economy. Lamont found this group was the largest of the three in America, while it was the smallest in France.

This segment of the upper middle class has taken on significantly more meaning since the 1980s and '90s made it shamelessly cool to be rich. I remember the very moment I realized that the look-out-for-the-underdog

1960s and '70s were over. In the early 1980s, I was in a hurry and I was cutting through a poster shop to meet a friend. As I took in the pictures around me one stopped me dead in my tracks. It was huge. A sexy blond woman in a mink coat leaned against a sparkling new Mercedes Benz. Across the bottom, in large bold letters, it said, "Poverty Sucks." I was shocked by the blatant lack of sympathy for poor people and the lordling-over of advantage. Almost thirty five years later, I see it was a harbinger of things to come.

In fact, in the United States the gap between the upper middle class (to say nothing of the upper class) and the rest of society (including the rest of the middle class) has grown astronomically from what it was in the 1950s, '60s, and '70s. Remember the cheerful song from 1990, "I Wanna Be Rich"? Well, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, lots of people got rich. The number of millionaires doubled between 1986 and 2006, and the number of billionaires increased from thirteen to perhaps a thousand, while the net worth of everyone else fell by 15 to 20 percent in order to fund this redistribution of wealth (Frank 2007, Zweig, quoted in Yates 2007). Only the upper middle class kept its previous value (while net worth in the upper class skyrocketed by over 70%). In these decades, the "power" 1980s and '90s, with its celebrity CEOs, as in the Gilded Age of robber barons in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, being a winner did not necessarily bring a sense of responsibility toward others less fortunate. Then, as now, this inflation of the upper class eventually led to joblessness and financial devastation for the rest of the population, working class and middle class folks alike.

Cultural classism sees these socioeconomic winners as crass and vulgar; moral classism sees them as selfish because they do not necessarily feel the need to give back to society. But, as Lamont pointed out, people who fall into this group strive for a comfort level in material things that is clearly valued across classes. American advertising constantly sells this comfort and luxury through mass media.

A freelance writer and editor who "makes enough to get by" told a story that illustrates this kind of classism, the belief that material success is an indicator of a person's value. He was talking with his nephew, a law student. The uncle was concerned about his nephew's incessant drive to win every competition, to be

better, smarter, faster than anyone else. I gently informed him that his competitive attitude would in the end work against him—be

counterproductive—because it consistently alienated the people surrounding him—both family and friends. He was most often described as obnoxious. His response pains me to this very day. He said, without missing a beat, “Why should I listen to anything you say—what have you got to show for yourself?” (Mark 2007, from Leonard-Wright 2011)

Lamont’s distinctions about different kinds of superiority offer needed complexity to the concept of classism in America. These three points of view offer three ways to disconnect and dissociate from people who are not winners in any of the competitions described above. They are also three ways for people to avoid guilt by making those less fortunate appear somehow less important, less worthy, less human. As she writes, “Exclusive behaviors are experienced as repugnance, discomfort, embarrassment for the excluded and as snobbery, distance, and coldness by the excluded” (Lamont 1992, 10).

Fierce Individualism

The American men in *Money, Morals, and Manners* generally saw themselves as exceptional individuals whose outstanding efforts or talents or intelligence earned them their superior status. Americans, as a whole, are generally more individualistic than people in other countries; we are proud of our ethic that a man (gender intended) can make his own way in the world, with “no kings or bishops” to whom he is beholden. But a much fiercer individualism has taken hold of the United States over the last thirty-five years. With increasing segregation by class, it becomes more and more possible to ignore the context within which different Americans live.

When I say “individual” I do not just mean “person” or “self.” The social meaning of “individual” implies independence from others. You are a person all your life, no matter how entwined your life is with the lives of others. But to be an individual you must be (or imagine you are) independent and somehow prove yourself so. In schools it is presented as the proper way to become a citizen. In most psychotherapy, individuality is prized above many other human characteristics. Though many theories of personality have also described a basic need for social connection in humans, psychotherapy is generally preoccupied with creating sturdy individuals.

But rugged independence and individuality do not reflect the lives of most people. It is certainly not a good fit for a mother who devotes her life to raising and keeping her family together, who practices “interdependence” (Kegan 1995). Is she less of a person because her life and identity are tied up with her family? Of course not. But she is less of an “individual” (Gilligan 1982; Belinky et al. 1986; Chodorow 1989).

Individuality, striking and standing out on one’s own, is not a good model for most working class people either, who have traditionally worked together to make things happen: clearing land, building houses and barns, sewing quilts, working in factory lines, bringing hotdishes to potlucks. Working class people, who tend to favor human connection, cooperation, and community over individuality and personal ambition, like middle class women before feminism, are treated (at best) as if they are underdeveloped people. When the lens one looks through is white, male, and middle class, the real lives of women, people of color, and working class people of all colors may be invisible. When a middle class lens is used to view working class people, we only see the parts that correspond, or don’t correspond, to the culture of the middle class.

When that middle class lens is taken off we see things we could not see while looking through an individualistic perspective. Not all societies praise the rugged individual as Americans do. Individuality, as a good thing, is a value peculiar to European and North American societies, and it is especially applauded in the United States. In far more cultures than not—and in America, once upon a time in the mid-twentieth century—human community is/was valued over individual achievements. Wealth was considered something that could be shared enough so that regular working people could live decent lives. Affluent people were a little embarrassed by having so much more than others, and certainly they did not boast about it—let alone call less-fortunate people “losers.”

For the last forty years, this fierce individualism, with an attendant decline in community and collective action, has moved slowly over the United States like a thunderstorm (Putnam 2000; Putnam and Feldstein 2003). Indeed, the unfettered pursuit of individual wealth, as economic winners engineered the particulars of financial markets to win more and more for their class, pushed the U.S. economy into near-total collapse at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century. The individualism that took America by storm has been ravaging the working class—who

find their strength in numbers—for decades. It hit the middle class hard over the last decade, and currently it rains on all parades except the wealthiest ten percent. Not for a hundred years has the United States seen such extremes of wealth and poverty or the lavish flourishing of the upper class while the vast majority of citizens fall further and further away from the American Dream.

Classism says that people with more wealth deserve it because they earned it. It ignores the fact that all of us who work create that wealth. It ignores that some work is paid obscenely well while other, more essential, work gets next to nothing by comparison. It goes on to say that economic class correlates with good character, greater intelligence, and a superior moral sense. It divides the United States, just as the new (unregulated) capitalism does, into big winners and devastated losers. It rewards the winners with obscenely large salaries and bonuses (by comparison to the spread forty years ago) and blames and punishes the working class people who do the majority of the work. They do work without which the United States would neither exist nor keep running.

Combating classism involves a deeper understanding of working class people, their real lives and cultural norms that are not based on individualism and competition but rather on community, caring, and mutual aid.

BELONGING VERSUS BECOMING

The inner lives of working class communities are almost completely invisible to people from the middle class. On the surface, to middle class folks these cultures often appear nothing more than Little League versions of the middle class. Or, as we have seen, they are sometimes seen as altogether contemptible. Small wonder these people do not trust the professionals and other upper middle class people in politics and elsewhere, even when, beneath all their overeducated verbiage and multitudes of commas, they are really on their side. Working class people and their communities have their own histories, values, and cultural logic—ones that are often at odds with the more uniform culture of the middle class.

In this chapter I focus on core differences, and opposing directions, between the cultures of middle class and working class communities. To illuminate these cultural differences further, I want to look at habits of communication, in particular the role of language, in middle class and working class families. As a counseling psychologist, and former