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Culture and social class

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A large body of research in Western cultures has demonstrated the psychological and health effects of social class. This review outlines a cultural psychological approach to social stratification by comparing psychological and health manifestations of social class across Western and East Asian cultures. These comparisons suggest that cultural meaning systems shape how people make meaning and respond to material/structural conditions associated with social class, thereby leading to culturally divergent manifestations of social class. Specifically, unlike their counterparts in Western cultures, individuals of high social class in East Asian cultures tend to show high conformity and other-orientated psychological attributes. In addition, cultures differ in how social class impacts health (i.e. on which bases, through which pathways, and to what extent).

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Introduction

Social class is one of the most powerful systems of social stratification, through which societies rank and sort individuals based on their access to valuable resources [1,2] such as wealth, education, and occupational prestige [3]. A considerable body of research has shown that social class shapes psychological processes [1,4,5,6**] and impacts mental and physical health [7–9]. Most of these studies are based on data sources drawn from Western cultures without taking into consideration the potential cultural specificity of the findings. However, social class is always located in a particular sociocultural context [10–12] that provides certain meaning and expectations to people who belong to different classes [6**,12–14]. Taking a cultural psychological approach to social stratification, this review illustrates how cultural contexts, specifically those of Western versus East Asian cultures,

influence psychological manifestations and the health implications of social class.

Cultural psychological approach

Cross-cultural studies on social hierarchy have suggested that individuals with higher social standing tend to show (and are expected to show) psychological attributes dominant in their cultural contexts [15*,16–19]. In the U.S., for example, individuals with high interpersonal power tend to exhibit more analytic cognitive styles ([16] see also [20]), which are more dominant in Western cultures [21]. By contrast, in Japan such a pattern is absent or even reversed; individuals tend to exhibit holistic cognitive styles, which are more dominant in East Asian cultures [21], regardless of their level of interpersonal power [16].

Drawing on such findings, a cultural psychological approach to social stratification places social class in a broader system of cultural meanings, which provides certain meaning and expectations to individuals who belong to different social class contexts [6**,13]. Cultural meaning systems differ with regard to normative models of the self, which have been shaped by ecological, historical, and political factors and have accumulated over time [10,11,22]. For example, in Western cultures and especially in the U.S., the self has been viewed as an independent entity defined by distinctive attributes. On the other hand, in East Asian cultures, the self has been viewed as more interdependent, fundamentally connected to others, and embedded in social relationships. Cultural meaning systems can shape psychological manifestations of social class by enabling and expecting individuals of high social class to engage in culturally sanctioned psychological processes that fit the view of the dominant self in their own cultural contexts.

Importantly, a cultural psychological approach suggests that there are both similarities and differences in how social class manifests in psychological processes and health because both material/structural conditions and cultural meaning systems shape manifestations of social class. The commonalities in the material/structural conditions associated with higher social class, such as availability of resources and individual freedom, should lead to similar sets of behaviors and responses across cultures. At the same time, culturally divergent meaning systems should also shape how people make meaning and respond to material/structural conditions, thus leading to cultural differences in manifestations of social class.

Are psychological manifestations of social class similar across cultures?

A considerable body of research on social class conducted in Western cultures has demonstrated that individuals of higher social class tend to show more independent and self-directed psychological tendencies compared to those of lower social class [1,4,5,6**]. For example, individuals of higher social class generally exhibit high self-esteem, value self-expression, and exert control over situations [1,6**,13], partly due to their material/structural positioning [5,23]. Such psychological manifestations of social class are likely to generalize to other cultures because the material/structural conditions associated with higher social class should allow people to promote their individual self-interests across cultures. At the same time, if culturally divergent meaning systems enable and require people of higher social class to engage in psychological processes that fit the dominant views of the self in their own culture, cultural differences in psychological manifestations of social class should also emerge.

In the field of sociology, Melvin Kohn and his colleagues have suggested that social class and material/structural conditions associated with social class — namely, occupational conditions — impact the self-directedness of individuals [1,24]. For example, in a study comparing the U.S., Poland, and Japan, people who were ranked highly in the class structure tended to show self-directed orientations, such as having higher self-confidence, and to value self-directed orientations in socializing their children [25]. Furthermore, in all three cultures, the psychological effects of social class were partly explained by the conditions of one's occupation (e.g. how much control one's supervisor exercises over one's work). Such associations between social class or occupational conditions and self-directedness appear in other countries, such as Ukraine [26], Russia [27], and Southern Brazil [28*].

Despite cultural similarities in the general association between social class and self-directedness, cultural differences in some psychological effects of social class were also observed. In Japan, where interdependent views of the self emphasize adjusting oneself to social contexts [10,29], individuals who occupy higher positions in their work organization tended to show more authoritarian attitudes and to value conformity [30], whereas such patterns were not found in the U.S. [24]. Further, a study examining over 40 nations found that higher education predicts lower authoritarian attitudes among democratic nations, such as Western cultures, but the link is much weaker among nations with an authoritarian state [31]. In nations where authoritarian attitudes are dominant, education may have a more minor impact on reducing authoritarian attitudes.

In the field of psychology, integrating the emerging evidence on psychological manifestations of social class

in Western culture [4,5,6**] with a cultural psychological approach [10,22], Miyamoto and colleagues have proposed that both material/structural conditions, such as resources and freedom, associated with social class and cultural meaning systems shape psychological manifestations of social class (Y Miyamoto *et al.*, unpublished). The resources and freedom available to individuals of higher social class across cultures should allow them to promote the self and individual goals (i.e. self-orientation). In fact, analyses of nationally representative data showed that higher social class is associated with higher self-oriented psychological attributes (e.g. self-esteem, goal-striving) and socialization values (e.g. independence) across cultures (Y Miyamoto *et al.*, unpublished).

On the other hand, cultural meaning systems may lead individuals of higher social class to engage in kinds of tasks that fit the view of the self that is dominant in a given cultural context. In particular, in American cultural contexts, where a history of voluntary settlement ('frontier' culture [32]) has shaped self-reliant and independent views of the self [33], individuals of higher social class are expected to engage in tasks promoting themselves and their own goals (i.e. self-orientation). In contrast, in East Asian cultural contexts, Confucian teachings emphasize social obligations that contribute to interdependent views of the self [34]; in these cultures, individuals of higher social class are expected to engage in tasks that promote social relationships or benefits for others (i.e. other-orientation¹). In line with this theorizing, the aforementioned analyses of nationally representative data also showed that in East Asian cultures, higher social class was associated with higher other-oriented psychological attributes (e.g. sympathy, support for others) and socialization values (e.g. feelings of responsibility), whereas such an association was weaker, absent, or even reversed in the U. S. and other frontier cultures (Y Miyamoto *et al.*, unpublished).

In sum, cross-cultural studies have shown both cultural similarities and differences in psychological manifestations of social class. Across cultures, due to the commonalities in the material/structural conditions associated with social class (e.g. occupational conditions, the availability of resources), higher social class is linked to self-directed, independent, and self-oriented psychological processes and socialization values (see also [35]). At the same time, cultural contexts also shape psychological manifestations of social class by making individuals of higher social class demonstrate the kind of psychological attributes and values sanctioned in their own culture.

¹ It is important to note that although self-orientation and other-orientation are often considered to be opposite poles of a single dimension, they are separable constructs. Thus, individuals can be high on both self-orientation and other-orientation unless the pursuit of one interferes with or goes against the pursuit of the other (e.g. when one has to make self-sacrifice to help others).

Are health implications of social class similar across cultures?

Social stratification also impacts mental and physical health. Numerous studies conducted mainly in Western cultures have shown that individuals with higher social standing have better mental and physical health compared to individuals ranked lower on the social scale [7–9]. Cultural similarities and differences are also expected for health implications of social class. To the extent that the negative health consequences of lower social standing are produced by adverse material/structural conditions and deprivation of resources, social class is likely to be linked to health across cultures. At the same time, cultural meaning systems can also shape how such material/structural conditions translate into health outcomes by guiding psychosocial factors implicated in the link between social class and health. There are at least three ways through which culture can shape how social class impacts health.

First, the relative importance of different bases of social class that matter for health differs across cultures. Previous cross-cultural research has suggested that whereas internal/subjective aspects of the self are more important for independent selves prevalent in Western cultural contexts, external/objective aspects of the self are more important for interdependent selves dominant in East Asian cultural contexts [36]. Reflecting such cultural differences, a subjective measure of social class (i.e. subjective social status [37]) predicted psychological well-being more strongly in the U.S. than in Japan, whereas an objective measure of social class (i.e. educational attainment) was a better predictor of well-being in Japan than in the U.S. ([38*] see also [39*]).

Second, cultural contexts can shape the processes and pathways through which social class impacts health. Researchers have theorized that psychological and social resources serve as both a mediating pathway and a buffer against the adverse health consequences of low social standing [40]. Which specific psychosocial resource is likely to play a major role may differ across cultures. That is, the type of psychosocial resource that fits the model of self dominant in one's culture may tend to play a mediating role between social class and health. For example, self-esteem, which is more important for the positive functioning of independent selves than for interdependent selves (e.g. [41,42]), partially mediates the link between social class and physical health in the U.S.; this pattern was not apparent in Japan [43*].

Third, cultures can also differ in the extent to which social class impacts health. Compared to studies done in Western cultures that generally found associations between social class and psychological and physical health, some studies conducted in East Asian cultures have found that those associations tend to be weaker (e.g. the links between lower social class and depressive symptoms,

unhealthy behaviors [e.g. less physical activity], morbidity, and mortality [25,44–48]). Although institutional and structural differences, such as the existence of a universal healthcare system and the degree of social stratification, likely underlie such cultural differences in the association between social class and health, cultural factors may also contribute to the differences. For example, given the findings of Miyamoto and colleagues (Y Miyamoto *et al.*, unpublished), individuals of higher social class in Japan are expected to engage in dual-task behaviors (i.e. fulfilling social responsibilities and pursuing one's own goals), whereas such individuals in the U.S. are more likely to focus on a single-task (i.e. pursuing one's goals). Such pursuit of dual-task behaviors may impose psychological and physical burdens on individuals of higher social class in Japan, potentially leading to worse health when compared to their American counterparts. In fact, compared to Western work cultures more generally, managers and professional workers in Japan tend to work longer hours, which is linked to less healthy lifestyles and higher levels of stress [49]. Most dramatically, the suicide rate in Japan has been steadily increasing since the 1990s, and that increase is largest among managers and professional workers, possibly due to the responsibilities and job demands imposed on these workers during the recession ([50] see also [51*]).

In sum, cross-cultural studies have shown both cultural similarities and differences in health implications of social class. Presumably due to adverse material/structural conditions associated with lower social class, lower social class is generally associated with worse health across cultures. At the same time, cultural meaning systems also shape how people make meaning and respond to material/structural conditions, thus leading to cultural differences in *how* material/structural conditions translate into health. Specifically, cultural contexts can influence first, the relative importance of different bases of social class that impact health, second, the processes and pathways through which social class impacts health, and third, the extent to which social class impacts health.

Implications and future directions

In sum, a cultural psychological approach to social stratification suggests that both material/structural conditions and cultural meaning systems shape how social class manifests in psychological processes and health outcomes. A cultural psychological approach has important implications for research on social structures. First, it has direct implications for societal changes associated with modernization in values and psychological attributes. Previous theories and studies have suggested that changes in the socioeconomic structures of a society, such as increased economic wealth, education, and occupational status, lead to the expansion across societies of self-oriented values, such as self-expression and self-esteem [52*,53–56]. If the effects of societal changes mirror the

effects of social class, societal changes in socioeconomic structures will likely lead to both culturally convergent and divergent changes in values and psychological attributes. In fact, studies done in East Asian cultures have shown that while self-oriented values have increased over time, as is the case in Western cultures [54,57,58*,59,60*], some other-oriented values, such as social obligations and contributions, remained the same or even increased over time [57,60*]. Thus, societal changes associated with modernization may lead to dual emphases on self-orientation and other-orientation in East Asian cultures.

Second, future research needs to examine the societal effects of growing economic inequality, which is on the rise around the world. Across OECD countries, the average Gini coefficient reached the highest value in 2014 since the mid-1980s (<http://www.oecd.org>). Even in Japan, where the majority of people used to believe that they belonged to the middle class [61], income inequality has been rising steadily over the past 30 years [62]. Studies have suggested that economic inequality of a given society has negative effects on the society's levels of psychosocial well-being and health [63–65]. It is an open question whether the negative effects of economic inequality are observed across cultures or whether cultural contexts also moderate those effects. For example, it remains to be determined whether growing inequality leads to more self-centric orientation (especially of high social class individuals) across cultures [66], or whether cultural contexts moderate the effect.

Evidence about the effects of social class on psychology and health is growing rapidly. However, the majority of these studies have been conducted in Western cultures. A cultural psychological approach to social class suggests that such findings may be grounded in and limited by Western cultural contexts and points to the importance of taking cultural contexts into consideration when understanding how social class shapes psychological processes and influences health outcomes.

Conflict of interest statement

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