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Social Class: Key Concepts in Modern Western Society and How to Measure Them

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Abstract

Background: Social class tends to be downplayed in modern societies and is now rarely studied, but the argument can be made that social class is still strongly present and sociologically and psychologically important. **Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to re-examine the nature of social class in modern western society and to distinguish it from the concept of socio-economic status, or SES, and also to distinguish subjectively perceived social class. **Method:** The method consists of a broad literature review encompassing academic writings in sociology, economics, and social psychology as well as national survey evidence from the U.S.A., the U.K., and the author's home country, Australia. **Results:** Social class is shown to be dependent these days mostly on the occupational prestige of the head of household and much less on income as measured in SES. The present paper offers an updated measure of occupational prestige for assigning social class membership, and argues that instead of SES we should be using a purely economic measure of income and assets. Lastly, perceived social class is what mainly affects social behavior, and this paper identifies the main cues that people use to signal social class to others. **Conclusions:** Social class remains a very important determinant of behavior in modern western society but its key concepts and their measures need to be updated.

Keywords

Social Class, Socio-Economic Status, Occupational Prestige, Economic Resources, Status Cues

1. Introduction

Social class, broadly considered, refers to one's relative standing in society, and remains an important determinant of many of the major decisions we make. An

earlier article on social class written by the present author (Rossiter, 2012) and a recent review in Wikipedia (2022a) list among them these major decisions: the area in which we can afford to live, the type of home we live in and how it is furnished, the vehicles we drive, the type of person we marry or form a life partnership with, the schools our children attend, and, most visibly, how we dress for work and leisure.

Modern westernized societies—meaning the G7 advanced economies of the U.S.A., Germany, the U.K., France, Italy, Canada, and Japan (the only non-western economy in the G7), as well as the smaller advanced western economies of Australia, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Belgium, Sweden, and Ireland (see Wikipedia, 2022b)—have undergone enormous social and economic changes since the 1980s. The major social change is demographic, in the form of a declining birthrate, which is resulting in an aging population in western countries and fewer young people available to take jobs (Salt, 2022a). Most countries are trying to offset the undersupply of younger people of working age by means of increased *immigration*. The United States, for example, now has a 15% foreign-born population, which is likely to increase with the U.S. President Biden's lack of control over the Mexican border. Other western economies with substantial immigration of foreign-born include Canada 21%, the U.K. 14%, Germany 19%; France 13%, and the present author's home country, Australia, with almost 30% (Lunn, 2022).

The most significant economic problem is that immigrants to the above countries tend to be of lower cognitive ability than the original residents and thus are less able to fill higher-level professional and technical jobs. In the U.S., for example, the 59% non-Hispanic White population has an average IQ of 100, the 19% Hispanic/Latino population has an average IQ of 88, and the 14% Black population an average IQ of 85 (for the population percentages see the United States Census Bureau, 2022, and for the IQ estimates see Lynn and Vanhanen, 2006). With the lower birthrate of 1.55 for Whites compared with 1.88 for Hispanics and 1.71 for Blacks (Statista.com, 2022), it is inevitable that the average IQ of the U.S. population, as time goes on, will be lowered from its current average IQ of 98. This in turn means that the number and proportion of people in the U.S. holding lower-status jobs, and thus falling into the lower social classes, will swell. A similar phenomenon can be expected in other multi-ethnic western countries such as the U.K., Australia, and New Zealand.

Accordingly, we have to rethink and update the way we define and measure social and economic trends and what these trends imply for social class. This is the focus of the present article. The article proceeds as follows. Section 2 takes a sociological perspective, examining the changing nature of social class in modern society and pointing to the major distinction between social class and socio-economic status, SES. Section 3 offers a new ranking of occupational prestige as the most efficient way to measure social class, based on the changing nature of occupations in western countries. Section 4 turns to social psychology and reviews the modern cues that people use to signal their social class to others.

Conclusions are summarized in Section 5.

2. Social Class Definitions

Firstly, we need to present some basic definitions as used in the present paper (see Table 1). The most important definitional distinctions are between social class sociologically considered and the concept of socio-economic status or SES, and between social class and the essentially social psychological concept of perceived social class. *Social class* definitionally is a sociological concept involving groups ranked in society by their social standing, which is largely determined by the occupational prestige of the head of household and remains relatively permanent throughout one's adult lifetime (Wikipedia, 2022a). *Socio-economic status*, on the other hand, or SES to use the popular abbreviation, is primarily economic rather than social, and its level can change quite substantially over the person's employment life-cycle (Wikipedia, 2022a). *Perceived* social class, lastly, is at the core of social psychology—see especially the definitive coverage in the book by British social psychologist Argyle (1978), which will be referred to again later—and is signaled by visible or audible deliberately presented cues, cues that in modern western society have become more blurred and subtle.

2.1. Social Class Classification

The most widely accepted classification of social class in the western world would appear to be the hierarchical six-strata system proposed by U.S. sociologist W. Lloyd Warner (Warner, 1960). Although Warner's system was developed a long time ago, and in fact was first proposed by him in 1949, there is no evidence to suggest that it differs today. Warner's system subdivides the three

Table 1. Social class: key concept definitions and measures.

Concept	Definition	Best measure
Social Class	Grouping of society hierarchically into distinct groups based on social standing.	Occupational prestige of head of household. Children take the social class of the household head until their career is under way, usually by about age 25.
Socio-Economic Status (SES)	The household's current economic situation, which changes over the person's employment life cycle.	Annual after-tax household disposable income, plus current market value of owned assets.
Perceived Social Class	Upper, middle, or lower class in status as perceived by others.	• Occupation • Residential area • Vehicle type • Dress style—work • Dress style—leisure • First and last names • Speech—vocabulary and accent

universally perceived levels of social class—upper, middle, and lower—into two hierarchical strata within each. These are shown in Table 2 along with recent estimates of the proportion of people in the U.S. that fall into each of the six strata. One thing that many sociologists have noted is that when the media are talking about "the middle class" or "middle America," they are actually referring to the lower-middle class of white-collar workers and the upper-lower class of blue-collar workers, which together make up about 70% of the population. Above the 70% "middle class," thus regarded, are the 17% regarded as "the wealthy," and below it are the 13% regarded as "the poor." The percentages are similar in other western countries.

Strictly speaking, assignment of people into one of the six social classes should be made by means of in-home personal interviews and observations conducted by an expert sociologist interviewer. The interviewer assesses and records the quality of the residential area, residence type, possessions, and living style (see Warner, 1960, and see especially the article by another leading sociologist, the University of Chicago's Richard Coleman, 1983). This exact method, to the present author's knowledge, is not used today because it is often difficult to get access to homes and apartments, and is very time-consuming and expensive.

2.2. Social Class Not the Same as SES

Instead, researchers typically use, as a substitute, a combination of SES indicators—notably occupational ranking, education level, and income—to measure

Table 2. Warner's classic 6-strata social class divisions for western societies, with percentages shown for the U.S.A. Two hierarchical strata are recognized within each of the three broad strata of upper, middle, and lower class.

Social class[a]	Common description	Estimated population percentages in each social class for the U.S. as of the early 2000s[b]
Upper		
Upper-upper	"Old money"	1
Lower-upper	"New money"	1
Middle		
Upper-middle	"Professional-managerial"	15
Lower-middle	"White-collar"	32
Lower		
Upper-lower	"Blue-collar"	38
Lower-lower	"The poor"	13
Total		100%

[a]From Warner (1960). [b]Estimates compiled from several sources listed in Wikipedia (2022d). The percentage for the lower-lower class is based on the most recent estimate that 13% of Americans are living below the official poverty threshold.

social class. The problem is that each of these indicators has shortcomings that render it inaccurate, so that the combination of them as "SES" is even more inaccurate. Their shortcomings are discussed below.

Occupation, in the form of an overall ranking of job types in terms of social prestige, is the most widely used single indicator of SES. Occupational ranking as a single indicator of SES is used by the U.S. Census Bureau, by the U.K. government in the form of the A, B, C1, C2, D, and E letter codes, and by the Australian Bureau of Statistics which assigns a hierarchy of job codes similar to that used in the U.S.

The big problem is that these occupation codes were formulated last century and fail to reflect the major shift away from manufacturing and agricultural jobs. These are being steadily replaced by all levels of *service jobs*, which now account for about eight in 10 jobs in the U.S., the U.K., and Australia (Wikipedia, 2022c). In the last few decades, there have been large increases in service jobs ranging from highly skilled professional and technical services down to less-skilled services in restaurants, bars, and coffee shops, and in home cleaning, childcare, and childminding. Also noticeable is the trend toward the re-naming of job titles to make them sound more prestigious, presumably for social status reasons.

Occupational prestige, however, is not a good indicator of SES because it is too much "socio" and too little "economic." It is a very good indicator of social class, however, if updated as shown in the next section of this article.

Education, measured as head of household's highest education level attained, is a second commonly used SES indicator. But education level has problems, and is becoming increasingly less related to SES. This is because, in the U.S., which is leading a trend sweeping the Western world, the great majority, 85%, of adults aged 25 to 64 have graduated from high school, which means that a high-school diploma is no longer the discriminator that it used to be between white-collar and blue-collar jobs (Wikipedia, 2022d). Nor do bachelor's degrees mean as much nowadays with the proliferation of lower-grade institutions that almost anyone can get a degree from if they can pay the fees and last the distance. In the 1970s in Australia, for example, there used to be just seven universities, but now there are 43.

With the high-tech digital revolution, too, a university degree increasingly does not matter. In Australia, for instance, the multinational IT company KPMG is expanding its high-school recruiting program to seek graduating students with high scores on high-school math tests, who the company will then train in-house. The training includes not only the advanced math and computing skills as taught in university but also job-relevant skills such as working in a team, time management, and clear communication (Harris, 2022). The financial lure is tremendous: so-called coders or programmers can expect to earn an average starting salary, in U.S. dollars, of about $104,000, data modelers an average of about $110,000, and anti-hacking IT security advisers about $116,000. These compare with the average starting salary in the U.S. of those who graduate with a bachelor's degree of just over $43,000.

Thus, education level is no longer a good indicator of SES, or of social class.

Income, the last of the three widely used indicators, has become an unreliable indicator of SES and a worse indicator of social class. The main complication is the growth in dual-income households, which now make up more than four in 10 households in the U.S., a number that is likely to increase with the economic crunch causing more people to moonlight on a second job (Wikipedia, 2022d). The average reported annual household income in the U.S. is about $67,500, but it makes a big difference in terms of social status as to whether this is one partner's salary or the combination of, say, one partner's $40,000 salary and the other partner's $30,000 salary. The adults in the single-earner household are likely to be in the upper-middle class but to be in the lower-middle class in the dual-earner household.

A further complication with income as an indicator of social class is the *source* of income. At the top level, the difference between the upper-upper and lower-upper strata is not the amount of income, which is extremely high in both, but rather that the upper-uppers derive most of their income from the inheritance of parental assets, that is, they are "old money" beneficiaries (Warner, 1960). The lower-uppers, on the other hand, the "new money" or so-called *nouveau riche*, have earned their money primarily from their own efforts. At the lower levels, welfare payments and illegal earnings from the "shadow economy" have to be taken into account (Hanrahan, 2022). This is certainly the case in Australia, which has an extremely generous welfare program and at the same time a high level of illegal activity in the form of low-priced contraband cigarettes and an almost uncontrollable and largely import trade in prohibited drugs.

Income alone, then, is not a good guide to SES, and has very little relation to social class.

Lastly, let us briefly return to the widely held idea that a combination of occupation rank, education level, and income will provide a better measure of SES, and by inference, social class. The problem is that these indicators are only weakly correlated (see **Table 3** for the correlations in the U.S. from about 1970, when these indicators were at their most stable). The highest correlation, r = .61, is between occupation ranking and education level, influenced by the fact that 50 years ago you needed to be a high-school graduate for most white-collar jobs and have earned at least a bachelor's degree for most professions. The lowest correlations are with income. These correlations represent an overlap, r^2, between the SES indicators of only 37%, 16%, and 11% respectively, meaning that a household could be regarded as having average socio-economic status with, say,

Table 3. Correlations between the three main SES indicators, U.S.A., *circa* 1970 (Jencks, 1972). Nationally representative sample of working-age adults.

	Educational level	Income
Occupational status	.61	.40
Education level		.33

a high occupational ranking, a modest educational level, but very low income and financial resources—or with the opposite combination of a low occupational ranking, modest educational level, and a very high income from whatever source. Thus, combining the indicators makes no sense.

As shown in **Table 1** earlier, we argue for a purely economic measure, a measure of the household's available economic resources, to replace the concept of SES.

Our main focus in this article, however, is on social class, and we said earlier that the best available and most efficient single measure of social class is occupational prestige. The next section explains why an updated occupational prestige measure is needed and shows how it can be achieved.

3. An Updated Occupational Prestige Measure of Social Class

Occupation ranking is by far the most often-used single indicator of social class. Typically, the ranking is done in terms of perceived prestige. Jencks (1972), for example, used the following straightforward question from Duncan's (1961) measure, the Social Economic Index, SEI, to measure perceived prestige: "Please rate these job titles in terms of general standing in the community." However, job descriptions have changed and so too have job titles and this means that the occupational prestige measure of social class needs updating.

The major change in modern western nations has been the massive shift from manufacturing and production-dominated economies to service-dominated economies. Service jobs, both professional and manual, now account for approximately 80% of all people employed in the U.S. and in the U.K., and approximately 76% in Australia. These percentages compare with China's 43% of jobs in the service sector, 47% in the industry sector, and a comparatively high 10% in the agriculture sector (Wikipedia, 2022c). The other major change has been the computer and Internet revolution, which has led to greatly increased demand for those with high-level mathematical and technical skills (Barrett, 2022) and has also caused a major change in the way we buy things, increasingly online, and how they are delivered, increasingly by post or courier. These two changes emphasize the need to get very specific about job classifications and where they fit in the spectrum of job prestige.

The best set of job classifications ranked in terms of perceived prestige that the present author could locate are those from the Australian AUSEI-06 survey (McMillan, Beavis, & Jones, 2009). McMillan et al.'s occupational prestige ratings are given in **Table 4**, with some adjustments made by the present author to reflect what appears to be the more recent situation. The ratings are on a 0-to-100 scale, where 100 is the maximum prestige rating. Although based on job descriptions in the Australian economy, they should closely correspond with prestige ratings for the same occupations in the U.S. and the U.K.

It should be noted that the social class divisions that form the headings in the table are the present author's and are therefore somewhat arbitrary. I would

Table 4. Detailed occupational prestige ratings for Australia, 2006 (McMillan et al., 2009). Prestige range is from 100 down to 0.

	Upper class
100	Medical specialists—including Surgeons, Anaesthetists, Internal medicine specialists, Psychiatrists
	Upper-middle class
94	Other healthcare professionals—including Physicians, Pharmacists, Optometrists, Dentists
91	Judges, Senior lawyers
88	University professors
86	Scientists
85	School teachers
84	Architects
84	Senior accountants
82	Policy analysts, Financial analysts
81	Design engineers
81	Senior nurses, Nurse managers and trainers
81	IT experts
80	Practicing psychologists
80	Senior government officials
79	School principals
79	Healthcare and child-care managers
79	High-level officers—military
78	Chief executive officers
77	Chief financial officers, Chief operating officers
	Lower-middle class
76	Journalists—all media
76	Clergy, Counselors, Social workers
75	Media professionals—film, video, etc.
73	University lecturers, below level of professor
72	Airline pilots
69	Engineering, Production, and Distribution managers
67	Project administrators
66	Training and development managers
65	Construction managers
63	Politicians and public officials

Continued

60	Police officers
56	Wool classers, Retail buyers
56	Manufacturers, Wholesalers, Importer-exporters
55	Science technicians
55	Realtors
55	Science technicians
54	Customer service and call-center managers
53	Hospitality and retail service managers
51	Senior sports coaches, Elite sportspersons
50	Actors, Musicians, Artists
	Upper-lower class
49	Tourism and travel advisors
49	Beauty and personal-care consultants
45	Firemen, Emergency workers
44	Sales representatives
43	Telecommunications technicians
42	Office clerical staff
41	Retail managers
41	Aircraft maintenance workers
40	Electricians
38	Telemarketers
35	Armed services personnel
34	Farmers
33	Receptionists
30	Train and bus drivers
31	Delivery drivers
23	Machine operators
23	Construction and mining workers
20	Cleaners and laundry service workers
	Lower-lower class
13	Factory workers—product assembly
12	Factory processing workers—meat, poultry, fish
6	Food packers
5	Crop and livestock farm workers
3	Clothing factory workers

place, in the *upper* class, with a prestige rating of 98 to 100, only top-level medical specialists, such as surgeons, anesthetists, internal medicine specialists, and psychiatrists, here all given a rating of 100. Other medical and also dental occupations—general physicians, pharmacists, optometrists, and dentists—I would place at the top of the *upper-middle* class with a prestige rating of 94, followed by senior members of the legal profession such as judges other than those officiating at a local level, and senior lawyers, given a rating of 91. Among university academics, I would say that only tenured full professors should receive the maximum rating of 88, noting that in the U.S., where all faculty are generally called "professor," associate professors and assistant professors would be more likely to carry the prestige ranking of *lower-middle* class, equivalent to university lecturers in Australia and the U.K., who are here given a prestige rating of 73. The *upper-lower* class, in the present author's system, begins with a job prestige rating of 50 and ends at 20, with the *lower-lower* class jobs rated from about 19 down to 3, depending on the skill level required.

A *personal interview* is the most valid way to determine the individual's occupational classification, especially because people are unlikely to be willing to answer these questions on the phone. The interviewer needs to reach, and then identify the occupation of, the main head of household. A suggested set of questions is as follows:

> CONFIRM THAT THE PERSON IS THE HEAD, OR ONE OF THE HEADS, OF THE HOUSEHOLD OR RESIDENCE. THEN ASK, IF NOT OBVIOUS: Is YOUR AGE UNDER 25? THEN ASK QUESTIONS UNDER A OR B, AS APPROPRIATE.
>
> 1) IF UNDER 25, ASK:
>
> a) For the purpose of this survey, we would like to record the occupation or job type of your *highest-earning parent*. As far as you are aware, what is his or her job title—what does he or she normally say it is to others?
>
> _____
>
> b) Briefly, in your own words, how would you describe the work that he or she does?
>
> _____
>
> ESTIMATED OCCUPATION RATING (FROM **Table 4**): ___
>
> 2) IF 25 OR OLDER, ASK:
>
> a) What is your present occupation, or usual occupation if you are not now working?
>
> _____
>
> b) What is, or was, your job title?
>
> _____
>
> c) How would you describe this job—what are the main things you do?
>
> _____
>
> ESTIMATED OCCUPATION RATING (FROM **Table 4**): ___

As emphasized throughout this paper, the nature of occupations in modern

western society is changing radically and this has implications for social class. Some facts and speculations are offered next.

Future Outlook on Occupations

Although the dream of almost everybody is to "be your own boss," only about three in 20, or 14%, of the workforce according to Australian figures from the 2021 Census, become a business owner or manager (Salt, 2022b). The percentage is more like 1% in hospitals, banks, the armed services, agribusinesses, and aged care services, whereas in resort or holiday towns or villages it can be as high as one in five, or 22%. Age-wise, most of the 14% "my own boss" workers are young business entrepreneurs in their 20s and 30s, who tend to revert to a more conventional job in their 40s and 50s as family responsibilities and the need for job security become paramount, and then may try for independence again in their late 60s and 70s, post normal retirement.

Job security, also, has become much more tenuous in modern western societies. As sociologist Leicht (2020) gloomily points out, these days only about 50% to 60% of the labor market has a job that pays for 40 hours a week of work, for 50 weeks of the year, and lasts for a whole career. He comments (p. 2) that "well-ordered careers that fully use people's skills and abilities [seem] like a distant dream of the privileged few."

And threatening all jobs, of course, are the growing trends toward robotics in surgery as well as in manufacturing and production; the increasing use of artificial intelligence, AI, to replace human medical diagnosis and even to choose for us our online information on *YouTube* and our entertainment via *Netflix* and other streaming services; and automation replacing humans in the global and domestic distribution chain (Pew Research, 2017).

With these expected disappearances of jobs, who knows what is going to happen to social class in the future? One possibility is that society will split into an upper ownership and high-level professional class and an extremely large lower class of service workers.

4. Social Class in Everyday Life

In this final section we turn back to social class, examining it from an everyday *experiential* perspective. Important topics to discuss include perceived social class, social class mobility, social distance, and the cues people use to signal their social class, or the social class to which they aspire, to others.

4.1. Self-Perceived Social Class

Just about everyone, by their late teenage years, can identify themselves as belonging to one of the four broad social class levels of upper class, middle class, working class, or lower class. Adults of working age, however, can do better than that when it comes to the important division within the middle class. A national survey of U.S. working-age adults in 2011 (World Values Survey, 2022) included

a tactfully worded question on subjective social class, as follows: "People sometimes describe themselves as belonging to the working class, the middle class, or the upper or lower class. Would you describe yourself as belonging to the upper class, the upper-middle class, the lower-middle class, the working class, or the lower class." The findings are shown in Table 5, along with the actual social class percentages taken from Table 2 earlier.

As can be seen, there are two quite striking discrepancies between self-perceived social class and actual social class. About twice as many people see themselves as upper-middle class as there actually are, and as a consequence fewer see themselves as working class than actual. Also, very few see themselves as lower class. What these findings seem to indicate is a fair degree of *upward social striving*, opening the door to the possibility of upward mobility.

4.2. Social Mobility

Just how much social mobility *is there* in the United States? The best estimates the present author could find come from the 1960s (Blau & Duncan, 1967), a relatively prosperous and stable period in terms of employment. These researchers compared the occupational status of white male adults of ages 25 to 46 with the occupational status of their father at his peak earning age. The comparison is shown in Table 6. Also shown in parentheses, for a reason discussed shortly, is the estimated average IQ level of full-time employees who fall into that occupational category, a level regarded as the safe minimum for hiring (see Gottfredson, 1997).

The averages in the bottom row of the table reveal that only about *one in three* sons stayed in the same occupational class as their father, while just over one in three moved up and just under one in three moved down. The most likely explanation for this is the "Mendelian" distribution of IQ among one's offspring (see, e.g., Eysenck, 1979). Lower white-collar fathers have an average IQ of about 110, but most of the children will range around this by up to plus-or-minus 10 IQ points, thus 100 to 120, and so a substantial percentage of lower white-collar

Table 5. Self-perceived social class percentages in the U.S.A. (2011) compared with Table 2's estimates of actual social class percentages in the early 2000s.

	Self-perceived social class (%)	Estimated actual social class (%)
Upper class	1	2
Upper-middle class	28	15
Lower middle class	32	32
Working class	29	38
Lower class	7	13
No answer	2	–
	100%	100%

Table 6. Comparison of son's occupational status with father's occupational status, U.S.A., ca. 1965 (from Blau & Duncan, 1967). Sample comprises White American sons between the ages of 25 and 46.

Father's occupational status[a]	Son's occupational status (%)		
	Lower	Same	Higher
Upper white collar (IQ of 120+)	46	54	Not applicable
Lower white collar (IQ of 110+)	37	18	45
Upper blue collar (IQ of 100+)	32	28	40
Lower blue collar (IQ of 90+)	9	36	56
Size-unweighted simple average	31%	34%	35%

[a]Parenthesized numbers indicate the minimum IQ needed to be successful in this occupational category (estimates based on the Wonderlic Personnel Test, Inc. (1992); see Gottfredson, 1997). Note that individuals with an IQ below 80, representing the bottom 10% of the IQ distribution, would be basically unemployable.

sons are likely to move up to an upper white-collar occupation or down to an upper blue-collar occupation. Similar two-way movements take place for the sons of upper blue-collar fathers, with an average IQ of 100, and the lower blue-collar fathers, with an average IQ of 90 (again see Gottfredson, 1997). The observation that upward mobility—except for the already upper-class individuals, of course—is more prevalent than downward mobility could be attributed to the fact that after World War II, many more people were able to access a full high-school education and more of them to gain college degrees.

A side note here (see Gottfredson, 1997) is that mathematical IQ is of paramount importance in the high-level technical occupations of today, and verbal IQ is most important in the other growing category of high-level sales and service jobs. A high total IQ *within* the job category is important for occupational success because it affects not only ability to start the job but trainability as well. The U.S. Army, for example, except in wartime, will not recruit anyone with an IQ of less than 85, mainly because such individuals are too costly to train and even when trained have too low a chance of successful performance.

4.3. Social Distance

As the British social psychologist Michael Argyle some time ago observed in his excellent book titled *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour*, social class is not just the passive existence of social stratification but rather refers to "groups of people who regard members of the other groups as inferior or superior" (Argyle, 1978: p. 183). Argyle goes on to suggest that there are two main questions that arise initially in the social interaction between oneself (S) and a newly met or newly encountered other person (O):

1) Is O of higher, lower, or the same social class as I am?

2) If higher or lower, how much social distance is there between us?

The question of (S to O) perceived *social distance* has long been studied in sociology and, as we will see, it is still a powerful influence in all societies today. Sociologist Emory Bogardus (1925: p. 299) defined social distance as "the grades and degrees of understanding and feeling that characterize pre-social and social relations generally," and he formulated the first widely used measure of it, called the Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1933). For the 1925 study, he wrote 60 items thought to represent increasing social distance. He then presented the statements to a sample of 110 adults considered to be "mature persons of experience" (p. 299) who were drawn from two groups, businessmen and public-school teachers, who were asked to sort the statements into seven piles that represented increasing social distance. The least distance was for marriage and the most extreme was exclusion from the country. At that time, before the Second World War, the nationals that most of these Americans would exclude were, alphabetically, Chinese, Greeks, Japanese, Koreans, Negroes (sic), Syrians, and Turks; Germans were acceptable, probably because they formed the largest immigrant group to the U.S. and it was well before the war.

Today, a slightly modified 7-item scale of social distance might be as follows (note that the numbering is not visible to the respondent). The respondent is asked whether he or she (S), with regard to an individual (O) of the specified background, would be:

1) Willing to marry? Yes/No

2) Okay with my children marrying? Yes/No

3) Okay with a parent or older relative marrying or partnering? Yes/No

4) Willing to have as a work colleague? Yes/No

5) Willing to have as a neighbor? Yes/No

6) In favor of allowing them to come to this country on a temporary work visa? Yes/No

7) In favor of allowing them in as a permanent immigrant, eligible for citizenship? Yes/No

These categories are intended to form a Gutman-type scale of increasing social distance. However, as an astute commentator in Wikipedia (2022e) points out, there are nuances in most of these categories that the researcher needs to be alert to. One obvious difference from previous times is that a person living in a modern western society today may feel bound to accept a divorced or widowed parent's choice to marry or to partner a member of a disfavored group, but indifferent to a sibling doing so, while objecting to one's child doing so. The fact is that interracial marriage rates in the U.S. have risen remarkably (Wikipedia, 2022f). Only 3% of new marriages were interracial in 1967, but in 2019, 19%, almost one-fifth, were—noting that public approval of interracial marriages has risen from 5% earlier to 94% today. However, apparently reflecting social distance differences based on skin color if not race, almost half of new marriages in 2019 were White/Hispanic marriages, while only 14% were White/Asian marriages, and just 12% were White/Black marriages.

Also, many people these days are more likely to interact socially with their work colleagues than with their neighbors, so that, for them, the social distance ordering of item 4 on accepting a person of a particular background as a work colleague and item 5 on accepting the person as a neighbor might well be reversed.

4.4. Cues That Signal Social Class

The other person's occupation—if known, or when stated in conversation—is clearly the main signal of the other's social class. When the other's occupation is not known, at least half a dozen other cues can serve as indicators of social class. These are: area of residence, type of vehicle owned, first and last names, work-clothing style, leisure-clothing style, and speech in terms of vocabulary and accent (see Table 7). Some of the trends in the use of these cues in modern western society are discussed below.

Residential area functions as an automatic cue to social standing. For instance, in the present author's home city of Sydney, Australia, a person who lives on the Lower North Shore or in the Eastern Suburbs is presumed to be upper class; one who lives in a high-rise center city apartment or in one of the gentrified Inner Western suburbs, or in the so-called leafy outer suburbs is presumed to be middle class; and one living in Western Sydney or the far suburbs, working class or lower. The really high-status addresses, as everybody knows, are Point Piper, Mosman, Vaucluse, and Woollahra.

Vehicle type is a second salient social cue. In Australia, drivers of new luxury British or German imports such as Range Rover, Jaguar, BMW, Mercedes, Audi, and Lexus, though Japanese, are perceived as upper class. Those whose main vehicle is a new model 200-series of BMW or Mercedes, or a Volvo or upper-range Volkswagen—especially with the lifting of import taxes on imported cars several years ago—or who drive the most expensive versions of Fords or the now phased-out General Motors-owned but Australian designed and made Holdens, suggest to most people a middle-class family. Working-class drivers, on the other hand, are typified by large, often Asian-manufactured SUVs, or the U.S.

Table 7. Social cues that signal social class (acknowledgement: Argyle, 1978).

	Status cue
1	Stated occupation
2	Residential area
3	Vehicle or main transport type
4	First and last names and nicknames
5	Work clothing style
6	Leisure clothing style
7	Speech—vocabulary, accent

derived Ford Ranger, or a family-sized sedan from a Japanese or Korean manufacturer. As in most western countries, the poor tend to drive older second-hand cars or ride buses, trams, or trains.

Officewear or work clothing is another reliable signal of social status. Well-fitting, semi-tailored or custom-tailored fine wool suits, and for men, an all-cotton neatly pressed shirt and a perfectly knotted tie, and for both genders expensive leather shoes and accessories, are classic upper middle-class cues, whereas lower middle-class professionals are likely to visibly let the quality of all these items go a bit. The standard giveaway of a perceived lower-class job is a *uniform*, and if a uniform is not required this is where you see more synthetic shirts, blouses or slacks and less expensive, often rubber-soled shoes.

Leisure clothing is a lot harder to pick statuswise these days with the general dressing-down tendency in casual wear. A reliable cue for upper status is often subtly-labeled brand name leisurewear with careful attention to detail, with notable upper-class brands including Ralph Lauren Polo (small horseman logo), Izod Lacoste (small crocodile logo), L.L. Bean, Eddie Bauer, Marc Jacobs, Hilfiger, Gant, Brooks Brothers, TJ Bale, Ted Baker, and in Australia, the staunchly traditional brand, Anthony Squires. The lower classes tend to favor sportswear brands such as Nike and Adidas or, in what unwittingly seems to be an upper-class putdown, giant-logo Polo or Lacoste sports shirts. An enduring example of upper classness is the U.S. "preppy" style—see especially *The Official Preppy Handbook*, edited by Birnbach (1980)—with the name borrowed from British preparatory schools duplicated in the north-east of America and meant to prepare upper-class boys or girls for an Ivy League or Seven Sisters education. The preppy style, the most visible brand of which today is Ralph Lauren, has never really been out of fashion among the U.S. upper set and can be seen in the wearing of strictly natural fiber clothing, Oxford-cloth shirts tucked in and shirt and slacks somewhat ruffled, Bass Weejun loafers or Sperry Top-Siders both worn sockless, horn-rimmed glasses if glasses are worn, men clean-shaven, and men and women opting for shorter, tidy haircuts.

Names that individuals go by are another strong cue. British-sounding rather than Latinate or other foreign-sounding surnames are one giveaway, as are long first names such as, for boys, Jonathan rather than John, Robert rather than Bob, William or Will rather than Bill; and for girls, Annabel or Maryanne rather than Mary or Ann, Gillian rather than Jill, Margaret rather than Meg. But the dead giveaway is nicknames—Jock, Monty, or Skip for boys, and Buffy, Bunny, or Muffy for girls are upper-class examples.

Speech—vocabulary and accent in particular—is the other well-known cue to perceived social class. As Argyle (1978) observes, the upper and upper-middle classes tend to have a more extensive and complex vocabulary, use more qualifiers, use correct grammar, and generally avoid slang. In western societies, an upper-class British accent rules over all others; in Australia, for instance, we hear neo-British intonation with an emphasis on clear pronunciation and avoidance of the Paul Hogan "Crocodile Dundee" type of rural Aussie twang. Faster and

more confidently articulated speech is another well-known indicator of perceived intelligence and to some extent social power.

In summary, there are plenty of ways to signal your actual or intended social class to others. And you can be sure that others will read these cues and infer your social class because this will determine how they will interact with you—deferentially, or as equals, or as superiors.

5. Conclusion

Social class divisions in modern western societies govern a great deal of our social behavior as well as our consumer behavior. The key concepts that need to be understood are social class itself; socio-economic status or SES, with which social class is often confused; and perceived social class, which, despite proclaimed egalitarianism and inclusiveness, still dominates our interpersonal interactions. Suggested measures of each are provided in the present article.

The main societal trend that will affect modern western societies—such as the U.S., the U.K, Australia, and much of Western Europe—is the inevitable lowering of the nation's *intellectual capital*, as represented by the population's average IQ. The lowering is due to a falling birth rate among the White majority coupled with the increased immigration of people from poorer nations who have a higher birth rate and a lower average IQ. Consequently, there will be a rise in the proportion of people whose occupation would place them in the lower social classes, while at the same time a decline in the number of people available to fill the increasingly intellectually demanding jobs of the future. Note that this is not happening in China or Japan, two countries that have a high average IQ—estimated to be 104 and 110 respectively, versus the U.S. average of 98 (Lynn & Vanhanen, 2006)—and highly restricted immigration.

Socio-economic status, or SES, is not directly a social phenomenon and should be confined to mean the household's economic status in the form of the *monetary resources* available. SES is therefore best measured as annual post-tax income and the current value of assets owned—recognizing that these assets may have to be converted into cash in a family emergency or to pay for a desired or necessary change in housing or location in later years. Too often, SES measurement is confounded by unnecessarily combining monetary worth with education level and occupational prestige when the last two are irrelevant to the household's spending power.

From a social psychological perspective, *perceived* social class remains a strong determinant of the nature of interpersonal and inter-group interactions. One's social class can be signaled in the longer term by residential area, type of vehicle and mode of transport, and in the short term by one's first and last name and even one's nickname, as well as one's dress style at work and dress style in leisure wear—both less distinctive these days unless you pay attention to detail—and, lastly, speech in the form of breadth of vocabulary and type of accent. Social interactions still automatically slip into a personal feeling of superiority, equality,

or deference. These interpersonal reactions broaden to maintain "social distance" between the various social-class groups.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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