



Research Dialogue

Stratification and segmentation: Social class in consumer behavior

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Abstract

Comparing working-class and middle-class consumers, Carey and Markus (2016, *this issue*) highlight the ways that social class determines consumer behavior through a set of mutually supportive culture cycles. We use their framework to re-examine several core assumptions in marketing and consumer behavior, assumptions that may fit middle-class consumers better than they do working-class consumers. Revisiting previous findings with an emphasis on social class allows us to offer an agenda for future research regarding advertising and consumer persuasion, material versus experiential purchases, conspicuous and compensatory consumption, and market segmentation.

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“A man’s ‘Me’ is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his mind, but his clothes and house, his wife and children, his ancestors and friends, his reputation and works, his lands and horses, his yacht and his bank-account.”

— William James (*The Principles of Psychology*, 1890, p. 44)

“In the quarter century between 1979 and 2005, average after-tax income (adjusted for inflation) grew by \$900 a year for the bottom fifth of American households, by \$8,700 a year for the middle fifth, and by \$745,000 a year for the top 1 percent of households.”

— Robert D. Putnam (*Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis*, 2015, p. 35)

Introduction

Consumer behavior could hardly be understood without considering social class. Our position in the social hierarchy has a powerful influence on almost everything in our daily lives—where we live, what we wear, where we travel, dine and shop, what we drive, and what media we consume. Furthermore, whereas social class shapes consumers’ judgments and choices, consumers’ choices in turn reproduce and reinforce their class belonging (Bourdieu, 1984; James, 1890). That is, class identity and consumption habitus are mutually constitutive and coevolving (Bourdieu, 1984). The need to understand the role of social class in consumption is more pressing today than ever as the economic stratification and polarization of American society reaches new extremes (Putnam, 2015; Stiglitz, 2011; Vance, 2016a,b).

One way to address the implications of social class for marketing is to consider the usefulness of social class as a basis for segmentation (Martineau, 1958; Wedel & Kamakura, 2012). Discussions of the predictive validity of social class for consumer segmentation date back several decades. Some scholars in the 1960s and 1970s argued that income does not

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capture social class because white collar and blue collar workers at the time had overlapping income ranges (Martineau, 1958; Wasson, 1969). Thus, scholars not only treated income as a separate variable from social class but also debated whether income is better or worse than social class as a segmentation variable (Myers & Mount, 1973; Myers, Stanton, & Haug, 1971; Slocum & Mathews, 1970). Social class, as indexed at the time by level of education and occupational status, did predict distinct consumption tastes and patterns, supporting its utility as a segmentation variable in certain contexts (Mathews & Slocum, 1969; Moschis & Moore, 1979; Wasson, 1969).

Contemporary views of socioeconomic status consider a broader range of variables (e.g., Adler et al., 1994), defining social class by measures that include income (e.g., Drentea, 2000), as well as occupation (e.g., Oakes & Rossi, 2003) and educational attainment (e.g., Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007). Taken together, these variables reflect a person's available resources such as wealth, social capital, and professional opportunities. Broadening these variables still further, recent evidence suggests that subjective socioeconomic status, typically assessed by asking respondents to indicate their perceived social class, can be at least as valuable an indicator as objective socioeconomic factors in examining the impact of class on psychological functioning and behavior (e.g., Adler, Epel, Castellazzo, & Ickovics, 2000; Kraus, Piff, & Keltner, 2009).

In line with this contemporary view of socioeconomic status, Carey and Markus (2016, *this issue*) conceptualize social class as a multi-faceted construct. Building their theorizing on studies that utilize both objective and subjective measures of socioeconomic status, they tie the distinction between middle- and working-class to the fundamental difference between independent and interdependent cultures. Carey and Markus review research indicating that middle-class individuals share an emphasis on independence and working-class individuals share an emphasis on interdependence. However, they argue that frequent exposure to the mainstream U.S. cultural emphasis on independence shapes a hybrid mindset among working-class individuals. Carey and Markus propose that social class differences are cultivated at the level of individuals, interactions, institutions, and ideas in mutually reinforcing cycles. By examining the implications of these cycles for underlying psychological processes (i.e., cognition, emotion, and motivation), Carey and Markus suggest that the meaning of consumer choice differs between middle-class consumers (e.g., express personal preference) and working-class consumers (e.g., fulfill relational goals).

In this commentary, we underscore the importance of social class in affording new theoretical and managerial insights. As noted by Carey and Markus (2016, *this issue*), the literature in social and consumer psychology may characterize middle-class consumers better than it does working-class consumers. Viewing previous theoretical perspectives through the lens of social class differences allows us to consider new research questions (e.g., Riemer, Shavitt, Koo, & Markus, 2014). Therefore, building upon Carey and Markus's article, we revisit previous theories and findings on information processing, advertising, material versus experiential purchases, conspicuous and compensatory

consumption, and market segmentation. In the process, we offer research questions and priorities worthy of further investigation.

Information processing through the lens of social class

Social class appears to influence the thinking styles people adopt (Carey and Markus, 2016, *this issue*), and this may have implications for how they process information in general. In this section, we consider the implications of social class differences in thinking styles for consumer information processing and persuasion.

Holistic versus analytic thinking

Thinking styles are largely shaped by one's cultural environment. For instance, Westerners generally develop an analytic thinking style, whereas Easterners generally develop a holistic thinking style (e.g., Peng & Nisbett, 1999; for a review, see Choi, Nisbett, & Norenzayan, 1999). Holistic thinking involves an orientation to the context or field as a whole, connecting and integrating its elements. In contrast, analytic thinking involves a detachment of the object from its context and a focus on the object's attributes (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001; Oyserman & Lee, 2007). As noted by Carey and Markus (2016, *this issue*), middle-class and working-class communities, due to the influence of different culture cycles, may also foster distinct thinking styles. In middle-class communities, where individuals grow up with loose social connections, people may form the belief that the world is discrete and discontinuous. Thus, they may learn to be independent, view themselves and others as unique, and learn to differentiate between objects in their environment. In contrast, people in working-class communities, who are embedded in dense social relations, may develop the theory that the world is relational and connected. Thus, they may learn to be interdependent with others and perceive objects in a more connected fashion. Therefore, paralleling differences between Eastern and Western cultures (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2013; Nisbett et al., 2001), farming and fishing communities versus herding communities (Uskul, Kitayama, & Nisbett, 2008), and Orthodox versus secular Jews (Varnum, Grossmann, Nisbett, & Kitayama, 2008), working-class versus middle-class communities may foster more holistic and less analytic thinking styles.

Although there has been little research devoted to working-class versus middle-class consumer information processing, a great deal of cross-cultural research has addressed information processing as a function of holistic versus analytic thinking. This literature offers a broad set of implications for cross-class comparisons.

Figure-ground processing in product evaluations

As one example, holistic thinkers may be more likely than analytic thinkers to evaluate a product based on background or contextual factors. For instance, participants who were primed to think holistically (vs. analytically) were likely to evaluate a neutral product (e.g., a mug) as more modern when the product was displayed on a glass table than when it was on a wooden

table. This is because people who adopted a holistic processing style incorporated their perception of the background (i.e., modern perception for a glass table) into their evaluation of the product (Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009). In line with this, Lee and Shavitt (2006) reported that consumers with an interdependent versus independent self-construal were more influenced by retailer reputation for certain products. For instance, people evaluated a microwave with the identical brand name and attributes more positively when it was described as being sold at a high-end retailer rather than a low-end store. Additionally, Lalwani and Shavitt (2013) showed that consumers with an interdependent self-construal, compared with those with an independent self-construal, were more likely to rely on product price to judge quality. This was driven by holistic thinking, which led interdependent consumers to see more connections between product characteristics (see also Ahluwalia, 2008). Therefore, to the extent that working-class consumers adopt a relatively holistic thinking style, they may be more likely than middle-class consumers to evaluate products based on background or contextual factors.

Attributions for product failures

Marketers are often concerned about how consumers will attribute causality for product-related events, including product harm crises. Cultural differences (and perhaps also class differences) in causal attributions are relevant to this concern. Holistic thinkers, who tend to consider both dispositional and contextual information, are less likely to make internal attributions for a person's behavior than are analytic thinkers, who tend to focus on the internal disposition of the person (Menon, Morris, Chiu, & Hong, 1999; Miyamoto & Kitayama, 2002; Peng & Nisbett, 1999; for a review, see Choi et al., 1999). Because of this difference in attributional styles, holistic thinkers are less likely than analytic thinkers to be influenced by negative publicity when evaluating a brand. Instead, holistic thinkers are more likely to consider contextual information, leading to more external attributions for negative brand information (Monga & John, 2007, 2010). This suggests that, to the extent that working-class consumers are more likely than middle-class consumers to think holistically, they may be more likely to make external attributions for product or service failures compared to their middle-class counterparts, and as a result less likely to feel dissatisfaction in response to negative product-related events.

Brand extensions

Predicting how consumers will perceive and evaluate a brand extension is a topic of central concern to both marketers and scholars (Aaker, 2012; Boush & Loken, 1991). Holistic thinkers, who are more able than analytic thinkers to uncover relationships between a parent brand and its extensions (Ahluwalia, 2008), may therefore be more open when it comes to accepting brand extensions. For instance, in research comparing participants in the U.S. and India (Monga & John, 2007), Indian participants, who tend to think holistically, had relatively positive evaluations towards brand extensions, regardless of whether the fit between the parent brand and

extension was high (e.g., Kodak greeting cards) or low (e.g., Kodak shoe). In contrast, American participants, who tend to think analytically, only evaluated extensions positively if they were high in fit (Monga & John, 2007). Hence, to the extent that working-class consumers think more holistically than do middle-class consumers, they may generally be more receptive to extensions of successful parent brands, even if those extensions are low in fit.

In sum, research on culture and thinking styles suggests that working-class consumers, as relatively holistic thinkers with interdependent self-construals, may be more likely to be influenced by retail and display contexts in evaluating products, to make external attributions for product-related events, and to accept brand extensions compared to their middle-class counterparts.

Advertising and persuasion

In contrast to the principles of holistic thinking, prevailing assumptions about how to design persuasive advertising messages cater to an analytic thinking style that may be more typical of a middle-class culture than of a working-class culture. Modern advertising strategies are often based on the assumption that consumers process information in piecemeal fashion, attending to individual features of products more than to overall and contextualized impressions of products. Advertising strategies are also based on a view of consumer motivation that highlights the desire to establish a unique identity by purchasing products or brands that offer unique features relative to others in the marketplace. Both of these assumptions are worth re-examining in the light of recent research on social-class differences.

Unique selling proposition

The classic principle of finding and emphasizing a product's unique selling proposition (USP; Reeves, 1961) has been accepted wisdom in the ad industry since the Golden Age of advertising. The focus on the USP influenced marketers in almost every aspect of advertising practice, including positioning, promoting, and selling products or brands (Haygood, 2007; Miller & Henthorne, 2007). Following this principle can effectively highlight the competitive advantages of a product or brand. As one of the best-known examples, M&M's unique selling proposition of "melts in your mouth, not in your hand" was extremely successful in separating M&M's from its competitors at the time (Reeves, 1961). By emphasizing the crunchy candy coating, the advertiser highlighted a distinct feature of the brand, one that distinguished it from its competition.

Will advertising based on the USP principle be as effective for working-class consumers as for those in the middle class? As noted earlier, working-class consumers are more likely to process information holistically. As a result, they are more likely to perceive connections between brand attributes (Lalwani & Shavitt, 2013) and better able to identify relationships between distinct products, such as parent brands and their extensions (Ahluwalia, 2008; Monga & John, 2007, 2010). Similarly, working-class consumers as holistic thinkers may be more likely to perceive connections between the unique

feature and other features of that brand, its context, or other products. Future research should examine how working-class consumers process advertisements that use a USP appeal. Advertising appeals that emphasize the unique selling proposition of the brand are based on the implicit assumption that the target audience is thinking analytically; that is, focusing on separating and distinguishing between elements (Oyserman & Lee, 2007). However, working-class audiences may be more inclined to connect and integrate a brand's various features and its contextual elements. This processing, and the resulting mental representations of the advertised brand's USP, may spontaneously link it to other features, situations, or products. Research is needed to address how this may affect the likelihood of unique features being remembered, or the likelihood of their being perceived as unique.

Furthermore, working-class consumers may not desire to establish their uniqueness by purchasing products with distinctive features. Instead, as Carey and Markus point out, they might be more attracted to products highlighting shared features with other products. Consistent with this notion, working-class individuals were shown to prefer advertisements that emphasized connection to—rather than difference from—other people (Stephens et al., 2007). Such findings raise questions about a core principle of advertising effectiveness. The USP, emphasizing the unique features of a product, may be less effective as a guideline for developing ad strategy targeted to working-class consumers. Instead, advertising strategies emphasizing the connection between features of the advertised products, or that appeal to motives to connect with other consumers, may be more likely to motivate working-class consumers to buy.

Elaboration likelihood model

Differences in the holistic and analytic thinking styles associated with social classes may also have implications for extending models of information processing and persuasion. As Carey and Markus (2016, this issue) noted, whereas those in the middle class are more likely to notice changes in the central objects of a scene, working-class people are more likely to notice changes to background objects (Grossmann & Varnum, 2010). This suggests that, when processing persuasive messages, working-class consumers may spontaneously pay attention to the background of an advertised scene and process the background and the foreground product as a gestalt unit (Lee & Shavitt, 2006; Zhu & Meyers-Levy, 2009). In contrast, middle-class consumers may spontaneously disassociate the product from its background.

This difference may have broad implications for understanding information processing and persuasion through central and peripheral information processing routes (Petty, Cacioppo, & Schumann, 1983; Petty, Ostrom, & Brock, 1981; for reviews, see Petty, Haugtvedt, & Smith, 1995; Wegener, Petty, Smoak, & Fabrigar, 2004). According to the elaboration likelihood model (ELM; Petty et al., 1981), the likelihood of a persuasive message inducing attitude change depends on the route to persuasion one follows (central route involving significant processing elaboration vs. peripheral route involving

the use of heuristics) and the type of persuasive cues that are present (central vs. peripheral cues). When motivation and ability to process are high, people tend to follow the central route to persuasion, and thus are more likely to be persuaded by central information such as argument quality, and less likely to be persuaded by peripheral cues such as type of endorser and attractiveness of the spokesperson (Darley & Smith, 1993; Kang & Herr, 2006; Petty et al., 1983).

It is not clear how holistic versus analytic thinking processes interact with the variables that influence elaborative processing. However, some evidence suggests that whether a persuasive cue is processed centrally or peripherally may depend on the relevance of the cue to an individual's goals (Pham, 1996; Shavitt, Swan, Lowrey, & Wänke, 1994). In one study (Shavitt et al., 1994), when people were primed to focus on sensory experiences, endorser attractiveness in a restaurant ad was processed as a peripheral cue, influencing evaluations only when participants were not motivated to process centrally. In contrast, when people were primed to focus on their social image, endorser attractiveness served as central information, affecting attitudes even under high motivation. Similarly, priming a brand evaluation goal led to processing a product endorser cue peripherally, whereas priming an ad evaluation goal led to processing the same information more centrally (Pham, 1996). These findings suggest that working-class consumers, who tend to prioritize interdependent goals and to focus on background cues such as endorsers and spokespersons, may tend to process such information centrally, as a result of which their attitudes may be affected by these cues even under high motivation.

The ELM persuasion model depicts persuasive cues as being processed in a piecemeal fashion, such that the influence of each type of persuasion cue can vary independently with the level of elaboration. For working-class consumers, who are more likely to process holistically, increased ability and motivation to process may yield different patterns than those observed for the middle class. As motivation and ability to engage in elaborated processing increase, this may lead to more gestalt processing and greater perceived connections between peripheral and central cues. Furthermore, because working-class consumers may be more sensitive to connections between persuasive cues, the fit between the background elements of an ad (normally considered as peripheral) and the central arguments made in the copy may be more likely to be noticed and elaborated. Therefore, to appeal to working-class consumers, marketers may need to carefully consider the coherence of the foreground and contextual cues presented in their messages.

Working-class consumers as hybrid thinkers

Carey and Markus (2016, this issue) suggest that working-class individuals are *hybrid thinkers* who are able to think in both holistic and analytic ways. As they argue, working-class individuals are frequently exposed to middle-class culture, which is characterized by independence and analytic thinking. On the other hand, they are immersed in working-class communities, which are characterized by interdependence and holistic thinking. This suggests that the self-construals of

working-class individuals may be analogous to those of bicultural people—they incorporate two distinct cultural frames. Having such multicultural mindsets may come with a number of implications, both positive and negative, for cognition, self-regulation, and consumer choice.

Frame-switching effects

First, bicultural individuals readily engage in cultural frame switching, automatically shifting their mode of interpretation to match the frame that fits best within the context (Hong, Morris, Chiu, & Benet-Martínez, 2000; LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Relevant cultural cues, such as a picture of a Chinese dragon, can activate corresponding cultural frames that bicultural individuals possess (Hong et al., 2000). Furthermore, bicultural individuals can spontaneously make inferences from relevant cultural cues (Fu, Chiu, Morris, & Young, 2007). Using reaction time data from a spontaneous inference task (McKoon & Ratcliff, 1989; Uleman, Hon, Roman, & Moskowitz, 1996), Fu et al. (2007) showed that Chinese-American bicultural individuals make more inferences from both American and Chinese cultural cues than do European Americans, who are not insiders to both cultures. In a related line of work, Briley, Morris, and Simonson (2005) demonstrated that bicultural individuals can shift their choice strategies with the language they use in a way that conforms to cultural norms. In other words, bicultural individuals can fluidly shift between cultural frames and working-class people (who are presumably possessed of hybrid frames) may be able to do so as well.

Although the capacity to fluidly switch between cultural frames may offer some benefits, Carey and Markus (2016, this issue) suggest that working-class people may have to engage in such frame switching more often than middle-class people do. Frequent frame switching is known to have negative consequences for executive control. For example, participants who had to switch back and forth between independent and interdependent mindsets, compared to those who adhered to one mindset, depleted their executive resources and, thus, performed worse at subsequent self-regulatory tasks (Hamilton, Vohs, Sellier, & Meyvis, 2011). In line with this finding, participants who had temporarily activated either a thinking style (Koo, Shavitt, Lalwani, Dai, & Chinchanchokchai, 2011) or a motivational orientation (Lisjak, Molden, & Lee, 2012) that was incongruent with their chronic one performed worse in subsequent self-regulation, such as resistance to a tempting snack. If switching between cultural frames or adopting a frame that is not chronically accessible is depleting, such as adopting an independent frame for working-class people who are chronically interdependent, this has implications for understanding and mitigating executive control challenges. It also suggests that, in contrast to previous research on bicultural individuals (Lau-Gesk, 2003), presenting a mix of cultural cues to consumers with hybrid self-construals may bring certain risks. For example, providing both independent and interdependent cues in a healthy-diet-promoting advertisement may backfire if working-class individuals become depleted after switching mindsets several times. In that case, in contrast to the

intent of the advertisement, working-class consumers might indulge more in unhealthy foods.

Creativity

Having a hybrid identity may benefit working-class individuals by enhancing creativity. Multicultural experiences such as being bilingual (Nemeth & Kwan, 1987; Simonton, 1999), first or second-generation immigrants, or interacting with people from ethnically diverse groups (Lambert, Tucker, & d'Anglejan, 1973; McLeod, Lobel, & Cox, 1996; Simonton, 1997, 1999) have been shown to improve creativity. People with such experiences perform better in brainstorming new ideas, such as generating ways to increase the number of tourists that visit the U.S. (i.e., the tourist problem; Jablin, 1981; Lamm & Trommsdorff, 1973). Similarly, Maddux and Galinsky (2009) showed that the amount of time lived in foreign countries positively predicted creative insight, as demonstrated with tasks such as the Duncker Candle problem (Duncker & Lees, 1945; Glucksberg & Weisberg, 1966), and this was mediated by the degree to which people had adapted to a foreign culture (i.e., learning ways to behave and think that are appropriate in a new cultural context).

Taken together, these findings suggest that working-class people, because they possess both independent and interdependent self-construals, may have the capacity to be more creative than middle-class people who have a more unitary, independent self-construal. Consumer creativity can be manifested in various forms such as innovative product adoption (Mehta, Zhu, & Cheema, 2012) and product usage (Burroughs & Mick, 2004). There may also be implications for consumer co-creation. Consumer co-creation at the idea generation and product concept development phases can significantly impact new product success (Gruner & Homburg, 2000), and the possibility that working-class consumers, owing to their hybrid identities, have a greater capacity for consumer creativity offers many interesting research directions. For instance, will marketers benefit more by offering co-creation opportunities to working-class versus middle-class consumers?

Bicultural identity integration

It is important to note that biculturals vary in the degree to which they identify with and integrate their cultural identities (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Hong, Zhan, Morris, & Benet-Martínez, 2016). Bicultural identity integration (BII) refers to the degree to which bicultural individuals perceive their cultures to be close and compatible with one other, versus distant and conflicting (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). This individual difference has various consequences relevant to psychological health and performance (Hong et al., 2016). For instance, BII can moderate the effects of cultural cues. Those with compatible bicultural identities tend to respond to cultural cues in a culturally congruent manner, yet those with highly conflicted bicultural identities tend to respond with reactance and behave in opposition to norms of the cued culture (e.g., Mok & Morris, 2013). This has been observed in a variety of domains including creativity. Previous literature suggests that Westerners perform better than

Easterners in divergent thinking tasks that require novel and creative solutions, presumably because Westerners are relatively free from normative mandates to blend in with others (see Mok & Morris, 2010, for a review). As a result, among Asian-Americans, priming with American cues led to increased novelty on divergent thinking tasks for those with high BII, yet decreased novelty on divergent thinking tasks for those with low BII (Mok & Morris, 2010).

These findings suggest that understanding the degree to which working-class consumers have integrated their independent and interdependent cultural identities is critical in predicting their reactions to cultural cues. The integration of two cultural frames can be influenced by a variety of personality and demographic factors (Benet-Martinez & Haritatos, 2005). Therefore, future research should investigate factors that may facilitate or deter integration of two cultural frames and examine the consequences of identity structures for people in different socioeconomic strata (Hong et al., 2016).

Social class and consumer choices

In addition to implications for information processing and hybrid thinking, social class may directly predict one's preference for and enjoyment of different types of purchase experiences and choices.

Material versus experiential purchases

One important distinction between purchases is whether they are experiential versus material. Experiential purchases are those made for acquiring life experiences such as vacations, amusement parks, and restaurant dinners (Nicolao, Irwin, & Goodman, 2009; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). Material purchases are those made for acquiring tangible items, such as cars and clothing. People generally report that experiential purchases increase their happiness more than material purchases do, according to extensive research (Carter & Gilovich, 2010; Gilovich, Kumar, & Jampol, 2015; Van Boven & Gilovich, 2003). However, this seems to reflect the tendencies of those with higher socioeconomic status.

Indeed, socioeconomic factors predict whether people endorse the value of experiential purchases over material purchases. As Dunn and Weidman (2015) have pointed out based on a review of Van Boven and Gilovich's (2003) results, people with low levels of income and education are less likely to report that experiential purchases make them happy. In line with these findings, when people of lower socioeconomic status were asked to recall the most recent material or experiential purchase they made costing more than \$100, they reported more happiness with material purchases than experiential purchases (Thomas & Millar, 2013). On the other hand, people high in socioeconomic status did not show significant differences in their happiness with experiential and material purchases (Thomas & Millar, 2013).

Tully, Hershfield, and Meyvis (2015) investigated why people with financial constraints may prefer material to experiential goods. When financial constraints were made salient, people provided with pairs of material versus experiential options were

more likely to choose material over experiential goods. Concerns about the lasting utility of purchases were found to underlie this preference. In line with this reasoning, people prompted with financial constraints preferred material to experiential goods, but only when the material goods were long-lived (e.g., a reusable poncho) not short-lived (e.g., a single-use disposable poncho; Tully et al., 2015).

There is another reason working-class consumers may not fully enjoy experiential purchases: they are more likely to think of opportunity costs during consumption. Resource constraints trigger thinking about opportunity costs (i.e., available alternatives that one could obtain with their resources; Spiller, 2011; Shah, Shafir, & Mullainathan, 2015). For example, Shah et al. (2015) asked participants to read Thaler's (1985) beer-on-the-beach scenario, in which participants imagine lying on a beach and craving their favorite brand of beer. Their companion suggests purchasing a beer for them and asks the price they would be willing to pay for it. After reading the scenario, participants indicated their thought process when deciding what price to tell the companion. High-income individuals tended to think of where the beer was being purchased (i.e., a fancy resort hotel vs. a small, run-down grocery store), whereas low-income individuals tended to think of other items they would not be able to buy if they used their money for beer. Thus, people with greater resource constraints, presumably working-class individuals, may not fully enjoy experiential purchases because thoughts about opportunity costs interfere with the experience.

We are not suggesting that experiential purchases are superior to material purchases. However, there are benefits to experiential purchases that material purchases cannot provide. For example, experiential purchases create memories and promote social connectedness (Caprariello & Reis, 2013). Howell and Hill (2009) have shown that experiential purchases lead to greater well being in part because they increase vitality through relatedness to others. This is particularly important to working-class consumers because, as Carey and Markus establish, they tend to be more relationship-oriented, loyal, and connected to others.

Furthermore, experiential purchases are less subject to social comparison than material purchases are (Gilovich et al., 2015; Howell & Hill, 2009; Solnick & Hemenway, 1998; Van Boven, 2005). For example, participants reported less jealousy when discovering that their peer obtained a better deal for the same experiential purchases than for the same material purchases (Carter & Gilovich, 2010). In addition, participants reported feeling less disturbed when they learned about newly available options or lowered prices after they made an experiential versus material purchase (Carter & Gilovich, 2010).

Because working-class individuals tend to convert purchases into monetary value (i.e., opportunity costs; Shah et al., 2015), drawing their attention to the social benefits of experiential purchases may mitigate the tendency to discount them. Indeed, ad appeals emphasizing the social-connection benefits of experiential purchases could make such experiences more appealing (e.g., "Where family fun begins"). Although it may be hard to shift working-class consumers' choices from material to experiential purchases (Tully et al., 2015), shifting

their attention from monetary value to long-term benefits may help to make experiential purchases more enjoyable.

Conspicuous and compensatory consumption

Further evidence that social class affords predictions about consumer preferences comes from research on conspicuous consumption as first described in classic institutional economics (Veblen, 1899/2007). Whereas the leisure class often uses *conspicuous consumption* to build their reputation, the working class often uses *compensatory consumption* to offset the feelings of being threatened in their interactions with the upper class (Veblen, 1899/2007). Upper middle-class consumers may engage in conspicuous consumption to signal their identities. For example, upper middle-class Turkish women preferred an American lifestyle as a way to show their status (Üstüner & Holt, 2010). New Black elites in Zimbabwe drew upon the status symbols of the middle classes of the United Kingdom and the United States to emulate the consumption patterns of the former colonialists (Belk, 2000).

In contrast, working-class consumers who may be threatened by social interactions with upper-class individuals may engage in compensatory consumption to offset these perceived threats. Cultural differences in the likelihood of experiencing power threat have been identified (e.g., Shavitt, Torelli, & Wong, 2009) and class differences have been observed as well. Evidence shows that lower-class individuals exhibit heightened threat vigilance compared with their upper-class counterparts (Gallo & Matthews, 2003; Kraus, Horberg, Goetz, & Keltner, 2011). For example, participants of different social classes were asked to complete stories involving a potentially threatening social interaction (e.g., “What would happen if you had to interact with a person who just rear-ended you in a car accident?”). Compared with upper-class participants, lower-class participants completed stories with more mentions of hostile or aggressive actions, thoughts, and feelings (e.g., “I yelled obscenities at the driver of the other car.”; Kraus et al., 2011).

Therefore, working-class individuals, for whom feelings of power threat may be a regular and inherent part of being a member of their class, may be motivated to engage in compensatory consumption to address the perceived threat. Consistent with this notion, relevant research shows that people who feel powerless (vs. powerful) engage in compensatory consumption in order to restore lost feelings of power. For instance, relative to participants who were primed to feel powerful, those who were primed to feel powerless were more motivated to buy status-related products (Rucker & Galinsky, 2008), preferred larger sizes of currency (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2010), and were more likely to buy green products that were favored by middle-class consumers (Griskevicius, Tybur, & Van den Bergh, 2010).

From the perspective of working-class consumers, such conspicuous consumption could be rewarding, because it may change their self-perceptions and behavioral patterns, as well as enhance how others perceive and treat them. As Carey and Markus emphasize, such consumption patterns could offer relational and security benefits as well (Cottom, 2013). For

instance, male participants dressing like members of the upper class (e.g., wearing a business suit) displayed behavioral patterns that were consistent with that class upbringing, such as showing dominance in a negotiation task with another participant who was unaware of the clothing manipulation, indicated by higher negotiation profits, fewer concessions, and higher testosterone levels. Meanwhile, participants who interacted with upper-class-dressing (vs. lower-class-dressing) participants also showed increased threat vigilance in dyadic interactions, as indicated by greater cardiac vagal withdrawal and reduced perceptions of social power (Kraus & Mendes, 2014). Furthermore, participants who wore a shirt with a logo associated with a high-status brand received greater compliance from others when they asked for assistance and received more money when they requested a charitable donation (Nelissen & Meijers, 2011). This research suggests that it might be beneficial for working-class individuals to purchase and consume upper class symbols to elevate status in social interactions. In a nutshell, these findings imply that marketers may benefit by appeals that emphasize the conspicuous functions of products/brands when targeting the middle class, whereas the compensatory function of products/brands may appeal more to working-class consumers.

Static versus dynamic views of social class

Any discussion of social class differences in our contemporary society also invites a consideration of societal trends regarding the widening gap between classes. Robert Putnam (2015), quoted at the opening of this commentary, documents the steep decline in the economic status of the U.S. working class since the 1960s. Putnam (2015) argues that as working-class people experienced sharp declines in socioeconomic status through job loss and economic contraction, the interdependent norms that sustained them began to fall by the wayside: communities fractured, families disintegrated, teen birthrates went up, etc. To the extent that this worrisome trend characterizes contemporary working-class contexts, it suggests that tracking the effects of social class *change* is a fundamental research priority. In Carey and Markus’s article, class is treated broadly and inclusively, yet it is examined mostly in terms of static categories. This begs the question, how do recent changes (especially losses) in socioeconomic status affect the predictions they outlined?

Another fundamental implication of this examination of class change concerns cross-class interactions. As Bourdieu put it, “each class condition is defined, simultaneously, by its intrinsic properties and by the relational properties which it derives from its position in the system of class conditions” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 171). We might thus expect that everyday interactions between different classes reproduce and reinforce their distinct consumption behaviors over time. However, the last 50 years have not only witnessed a dramatic increase in wealth inequality, they have also been associated with a dramatic increase in segregation of the classes. Although at one time middle-class and working-class children routinely attended the same schools and lived in the same neighborhoods, Putnam (2015) meticulously documents that this is far less the case today. After the great recession of

2008–2009, as income inequality dramatically increased, class segregation intensified as observed in education, housing, and job opportunities (Putnam, 2015; Vance, 2016a). Even before the great recession, class boundaries were readily observable: working-class and middle-class individuals lived in different neighborhoods, attended different social clubs and ate different kinds of food (Bourdieu, 1984; Domhoff, 1998). Coinciding with the growing gap in income between social classes, class mobility in the United States is the lowest among modern industrialized countries (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Piketty & Saez, 2003). Such extensive class segregation, beginning in childhood and intertwined with limited class mobility, may have implications for understanding the self-construals of the contemporary working class.

Research is needed to address how shifts in societal structures and norms may influence the nature and hybridity of working-class identity. The predictions may depend in part on one's definition of social class. For instance, a perspective that emphasizes social class rank (Kraus, Tan, & Tannenbaum, 2013; Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012) might argue that as long as one's relative economic outcomes and rank remained similar to those of one's local community (that is, as long as everyone's outcomes were similarly diminished), one's self-construal would remain the same. Being surrounded by others in similar circumstances could buffer the stressful impact of lower-class rank on individuals (Kraus et al., 2013). In line with this, research suggests that relative income is more important than absolute income in driving life satisfaction (Boyce, Brown, & Moore, 2010; Kraus et al., 2013). Moreover, Kraus et al. (2013) review findings suggesting that increased inequality heightens the impact of social class rank on behavior by heightening the salience of lower-class rank. These streams of research suggest that the increased inequality that has impacted the working class directly might lead them to experience a stronger sense of their class status, which may activate a more salient level of interdependence.

On the other hand, major shifts in the economic circumstances of the working class in the U.S. have come with important structural implications. As previously noted, class boundaries increasingly define one's options, and the institutions that once served those lower on the socioeconomic ladder have sharply diminished resources. Once social institutions and interdependent norms cannot be relied upon to sustain local communities, this may erode interdependent self-construals for everyone, regardless of their relative class rank in their community. Increased alienation and reduced community engagement and civic involvement may follow (Putnam, 2015; see Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012, for a review), and indeed some research already suggests that known social inequalities in civic engagement have become magnified in recent years (Syvertsen, Wray-Lake, Flanagan, Briddell, & Osgood, 2011). For instance, results from the National Election Study reveal large and growing class differences in youth voter participation (Wray-Lake & Hart, 2012). The consequences of reduced socioeconomic status and living standards on prevailing norms, interdependent actions, and personal self-construal deserve further study.

Finally, to the extent that cross-class interpersonal contacts are decreasing in frequency, what are the implications for

working-class individuals' hybrid identities? Carey and Markus's analysis highlights the importance of the interaction level of the culture cycle for building and sustaining self-construal within class, through everyday exchanges with other people. Does the intersectionality that is associated with being a member of the working class similarly depend upon frequent personal contacts with people in the middle class? This discussion highlights the possibility that self-construals may be patterned by the ideas, institutions, and interactions of their relevant culture cycles (Carey and Markus, 2016, this issue) and by the impact of societal and economic changes on those cycles. As incomes and buying power of the working class draw closer to poverty levels, research is needed to examine the interplay of dynamic socio-structural factors, rising economic inequality, and cultural cycles on self-construal and consumer behavior.

Conclusion

A consideration of social class differences is foundational to the understanding of consumer behavior. Carey and Markus (2016, this issue) framework offers new insights about the culture cycles that develop and sustain differences between working-class and middle-class consumers. We build on their framework to re-examine previous research and theorizing through the lens of social class differences. This review affords a number of novel predictions useful for understanding consumer behavior. For instance, re-examining models of information processing and persuasion suggests that current frameworks may assume analytic thinking, whereas working-class consumers may be more likely to engage in holistic thinking. These distinct thinking styles have important consequences for responses to product failures, to brand extensions, and to persuasive advertising messages.

In addition, given Carey and Markus's emphasis on the hybrid self-construals of working-class consumers, we consider the implications of research on bicultural individuals for predicting the identity structure of working-class consumers. Novel implications of a focus on social class for consumer preferences in specific domains are also addressed, such as preferences for material versus experiential purchases and conspicuous versus compensatory consumption options. Finally, the widening gap between social classes in our contemporary society, and the associated shifts in societal structures and norms, invite an examination of the effects of social class change on consumer behavior.

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