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The Workings of Class
**How understanding a subtle difference between social classes can
promote equality in the classroom – and beyond**

By Adrie Kusserow

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the workings

After 12 years of teaching language arts at a middle school that serves many working-class children, Ellen O'Neil has decided to change careers.

"I come home every night, bone-tired, feeling like the blood has been drained out of my body," she explains. "It's like we're trying to educate a population that doesn't want to be educated. They show up late or don't show up at all. On a good day, half of them do their homework."

"The parents aren't much better," she continues. "They don't show up for back-to-school night, they don't check their children's work, they don't return my phone calls."

"At the beginning of the school year, I work hard to get everyone involved. But the ones who don't follow through – I just stop wasting my energy. And that feels really bad. I know it's wrong, but I don't know what else to do."

On a slightly lower rung of the socioeconomic ladder lives Ryan James,¹ a prison guard. James is also perturbed by certain unnamed, amorphous, yet very real social class issues that keep cropping up at his daughter's preschool. For example, a teacher met with James to view and discuss his daughter's portfolio – a book of "work" that was supposed to express his daughter's unique self through selected pieces of art, the activities she chose in class, and things she said.

James found this exercise to be ludicrous. "I mean you're psychoanalyzing a 4-year-old kid that is standing there with their hand in paint," he says. "If you ask them to draw a picture of a flower and they drew a weed, maybe you could figure something out there, but I don't think you're gonna figure out hand paintin'. So I told [the teacher] it was just a little too much, and I said, 'You're getting a little too serious with the 4-year-olds.' She said, 'Well, this is the board of education's rules, now, so we have to do it.' And I said, 'Well, I don't want to hear it. This is bullshit.'"

Class-Based Styles of Individualism

Throughout the social sector, many highly educated, well-intentioned, predominantly white middle-class people like Ellen O'Neil are attempting to reach out across the class divide – to educate, to help, perhaps even to reveal new paths into the middle class. At the same time, many motivated, conscientious, lower- and working-class people like Ryan James are attempting to use these services. All too often, however, these attempts to transcend class differences end in failure, and leave service providers and clients



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Comparing Soft and Hard Individualisms in Manhattan and Queens

	SOFT	HARD
Individualism means	Emotional expression, creativity, uniqueness	Emotional control, self-reliance, toughness, perseverance
The self is	Delicate and full of promise, like a blooming flower	Hard and protective, like a fortress; strong and determined, like a rocket or Superman
Caregivers should	Give praise and encouragement, mirror emotions, foster creativity	Tease, discipline, toughen up, nurture without softening
Caregivers shouldn't	Damage self-esteem, block flowering of the self	Spoil or overindulge
World is	Safe and welcoming, open to uniqueness	Potentially dangerous and forbidding, filled with ups and downs
Future holds	Success, personal achievement	Uncertainty, struggle, possible fulfillment (with hard work)

scratching their heads, wondering what went wrong.

My anthropological research suggests that one subtle class-based difference may underlie many of these frustrated cross-class encounters.² That difference is what working-class versus upper-middle-class Americans understand “individualism” to mean. After many years of contrasting “individualist” Americans with people from other, “collectivist” cultures, social scientists are now recognizing that within the United States the meaning of individualism varies widely. We are also finding that not all communities practice, use, or socialize the same strands of individualism.

Through my fieldwork in Manhattan and Queens, I identified two styles of individualism: a “soft,” upper-middle-class individualism, which focuses on the cultivation and expression of unique feelings, thoughts, ideas, and preferences; and a “hard,” working-class individualism, which focuses on the cultivation of self-reliance, perseverance, determination, protectiveness, and toughness. These two styles of individualism aren’t rigid boxes; people of all social classes can and do fluidly use each style. However, the working-class Queens residents in my research leaned more toward a hard individualistic style, just as the upper-middle-class Manhattan residents tended more toward soft individualism.

Hard and soft individualisms not only reflect class differences in material worlds and everyday realities, but also shape parents’, teachers’, and children’s everyday attitudes and habits. Additionally, soft and hard individualisms correspond to the class-based futures that parents and teachers envision for their children – trajectories that are seen as normal and natural, the

“of course,” obvious choice. (Of course she isn’t going to be a waitress. Of course he isn’t going to get a Ph.D.) Insofar as children internalize these different styles of individualism, social inequality is reproduced, generation after generation, despite the myth of American mobility.

Studying Class in a “Classless” Society

When Americans think about social class – which is not often, given our culture’s myth of classlessness³ – we usually think about the material evidence: different forms of transit, different kinds and sizes of houses, different neighborhoods, different jobs, different access to healthcare, different exposures to pollution and violence, plus different styles of music, clothes, food, and pastimes.

But class is not just about the material world, and class cultures are not just skin-deep. They penetrate the core of our being, down to the way we hold our forks, tell our stories, console or discipline our children, talk to our neighbors, remember our pasts, or view our futures. Social class is not simply shown and taken off in the manner of a Harvard degree or a gold wristwatch, but lived in the flesh, held in the cells of one’s self-image and one’s visions of life’s possibilities.

To examine how white Americans from different social classes⁴ think about, internalize, and express their individualism, I spent two years interviewing parents and teachers, observing classrooms, attending community events, and conducting home visits in three New York communities: Parkside, Kelley, and Queenston. (“Kelley” and “Queenston” are pseudonyms.) Rather than bluntly asking people, “What does individualism mean?” I studied how parents and teachers talk about or interact with their preschool-aged children. By studying preschoolers and their caregivers, I not only learned more about social class differences in understandings

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of individualism, but also examined how those different ideas are transmitted to new generations.

I focused on white preschoolers and caregivers to control for the confounding influence of race. Americans tend to confound class and race, on the one hand equating the lower working class and the poor with people of color, and on the other hand equating the middle, upper-middle, and upper classes with whites. My research is a reminder that relatively homogeneous, white working- and lower-class neighborhoods still exist in America.

Growing Soft Individuals on the Upper East Side

Parkside is a wealthy, mainly white, Upper East Side neighborhood in Manhattan that consists of neo-Georgian townhouses, Beaux Arts mansions, art galleries, boutiques, and museums. In Parkside's relative safety, comfort, and affluence, soft individualism thrives. The parents and teachers that I observed emphasized the delicacy and uniqueness of the child's self, the extreme care, resources, wide canvas, and gentle touch needed to help this fragile self unfold and realize its full potential.

One of the most common metaphors used to describe the child's unfolding was that of a flower growing, blossoming, and blooming to reveal its unique contents – its feelings, desires, talents, tastes, imagination, and creativity. Most important among these contents were the child's emotions, which were held to be the markers of the idiosyncratic, "true self." Sociologist Steven Tipton calls this emotion-focused style of individualism "psychologized individualism."⁵

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Parkside parents linked the careful cultivation of psychologized individualism to their children's eventual achievement: In their interior well of emotions, children can find both the uniqueness that will set them apart from their peers and the motivational fuel to propel them ahead of their peers.

But because the flowering of the psychologized self is a delicate process, Parkside parents often worried that any large, clumsy, or harsh interference might stunt it. For example, many of the Parkside parents and teachers I met refrained from giving direct commands to their children, and instead disciplined them through gentle or almost tentatively voiced questions. ("Do you really think you should be bouncing that ball now, Timmy?") Parkside parents and teachers also tried to save face and voice a lot more than working-class Queenston and Kelley parents, masking their anger, annoyance, and frustration with children so as not to hurt their feelings or keep them from opening up.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHANNON FAGAN



A softer form of individualism thrives in New York's affluent Parkside neighborhood.

Producing Hard Individuals in Queens

Across the East River from Parkside are the Queens neighborhoods of Queenston and Kelley – harder realities that give rise to harder individualisms. Queenston is a lower-working-class community that includes housing projects, a school for juvenile delinquents, and miles of chipped cement, graffiti-covered signs, garbage, and the occasional prostitute. And close to Queenston is Kelley, a tight-knit, white working-class community of tidy, close-set houses and a few small storefronts, churches, and schools.

For Queenston parents, hard individualism flowed from their tough environment (gangs, drugs, racism, violence), their often-difficult pasts (child abuse, alcoholism, drug addiction, divorce), and their belief that the future holds struggle and hardship. Phrases like staying put, standing your ground, minding your own business, keeping up your pride, and not letting others get under your skin were common. Parents implied that



Queenston's tough streets produce a hard style of individualism.

these tougher boundaries of a resilient self are better able to keep out the negative influences of the street (gangs, peer pressure, violence, alcohol, drugs). Hence, individualism in the form of “not relying on or trusting anyone else,” self-determination, privacy, and self-reliance were often seen as ways of surviving the rigors of a bad system, a system that could not be trusted.

Kelley parents likewise endorsed hard individualism, but of a slightly different variety. When Kelley parents spoke of hardening the self, it was often in the context of enabling children to burst through to a higher socioeconomic level. Class-climbing images like stepping out, putting one’s best foot forward, Superman, rockets, and building momentum were common. A thick, tough skin was needed not for protection from danger,



On Kelley's tidy blocks, hard individualism emphasizes climbing the socioeconomic ladder.

but for surviving the hard work and perseverance needed on the way up the socioeconomic ladder.

Raising a hard individual requires different techniques than does raising a soft individual. Teasing, yelling, spanking, issuing direct commands without a “please” or “thank you,” openly expressing one’s annoyance or boredom with a child, directly contradicting a child’s story (see sidebar, p. 45), and not immediately responding to a child’s questions or crying were all practices that both Kelley and Queenston adults used more regularly and with less guilt than did Parkside adults. Through these acts,

the Queens parents not only revealed that they wanted their children to become tougher and more resilient, but also showed that they believed their children to be tougher and more resilient *to begin with*.

Class in the Classroom

As teacher Ellen O’Neil’s and parent Ryan James’ frustrations reveal, class cultures often collide in schools. Education is allegedly America’s great social leveler, the institution through which people, regardless of their class backgrounds, are resorted according to their intelligence, talent, perseverance, and fortitude. But as Harvard assistant professor of sociology Prudence Carter points out, “School is predicated on the values and practices of the middle class, and so lower- and working-class kids are automatically at a disadvantage.”⁶ Included in the middle-class values and practices of school are those of soft individualism.

In a few of the Head Start programs I observed, for example, the clash of working-class hard individualism with the more softly individualistic middle-class educational culture often manifested itself with the lower-working-class children simply being silent, as if mystified by the fairylike teacher who moved around the classroom with a constant glow and smile, showering praise upon them. When these children scuffled with each other, I saw how confused they were when their middle-class



A mismatch between the cultures of home and school can disadvantage working-class children.

teachers took them aside and asked them to explain why they wanted to hit each other and how it made them feel. Coming from families where they were used to being spanked, shamed, or simply ignored for fighting, they seemed bewildered by this new, therapeutic way of dealing with conflicts.

Working-class children may also be flummoxed by some of

Some of these requirements may even directly conflict with a working-class family's values. O'Neil recalls one such instance: "One of the last projects in my class was putting together a poetry book. So this working-class kid wrote these very sweet poems about how weird it is to feel yourself growing into a man. I asked him, 'Don't you want to take your poetry book home?'"

"AS CHILDREN disengage from education, they are labeled as uncooperative and hard to reach," instead of just out of cultural sync, says Prudence Carter.

their more softly individualistic academic requirements. "I tell these kids to use their imagination, and they say: 'What do you mean? I don't have an imagination,'" says O'Neil. "It's so strange. I can see some stony old man not having an imagination, but a 12-year-old?"

And the kid said: 'Oh no. If my dad saw these he would beat me.'" O'Neil says that although the kid was joking about the beating, he was serious about how deep his embarrassment would run should his sensitivity and imagination be discovered.

This kind of dissonance between one's home culture and

the culture of school can seal children into the mind-set that education is not for them, and that school is not a key and relevant part of their futures. Their alienation from school may then set up a cascade of events that hinders their progress in other life domains.

“As children disengage from education, they are labeled as uncooperative and hard to reach,” instead of just out of cultural sync, says Carter. Once pigeonholed as problematic, many lower-class kids then get tracked into lower-level and remedial classes. “Tracking then has a long-term impact on who goes to college, and on what kind of college you go to,” reports Carter. In this way, the supposedly level playing field of education slowly becomes a long and unlikely uphill climb for working- and lower-class kids.

“MANY working-class people see musing upon their own psyches as selfish, and see the therapists who insist that they do so as impolite,” says Barbara Jensen.

In contrast, “Middle-class parents make sure their kids know how to communicate with teachers and other adults in power,” says Carter. “[Middle-class children] know how to be curious and inquisitive and how to ask questions.” As a result, when middle-class children show up for their first day of school, they have already mastered a large, albeit implicit, portion of the curriculum. Their middle-class ways get called “talent,” “intelligence,” “imagination,” “sensitivity,” and other supposedly inborn traits necessary for scholastic success – rather than class-based knowledge.

This identification of soft individualism as natural, innate behavior further hides the process that middle-class children went through to learn it, making soft individualism seem even more ungraspable and mysterious to working-class children. Meanwhile, middle-class children often “think they hit a triple, when in reality they were born on third base,” says Philip DeVol, who writes and consults on poverty issues.

Working-class parents are often just as put off as their kids

by the softly individualistic demands of school. In the Queenston preschool that I observed, for example, posters in classrooms and hallways advertised the more “sensitive” and child-centered values that the New York Board of Education hoped would filter down into the classroom and into the child’s home. These posters usually focused on how to avoid damaging the child’s self-esteem and gave specific recommendations for showing appropriate appreciation for his or her uniqueness and individuality.

For example, the following poster aimed to instruct Queenston parents on how to affirm children of different ages:

Queenston Preschool Family Affirmatives List

Infants: *I’m so glad you’re here. You’re wonderful.*

Toddlers: *I love watching you grow. I’m glad you’re who you are.*

Preschool: *I’m glad you have your opinions. I love how curious you are.*

School Age: *I love who you are becoming. It’s wonderful to watch you make your own decisions.*

Adults: *I am a wonderful parent. I’m glad I’m who I am.*

What was most ironic about these posters were the ways in which they sugarcoated the rather grim realities most parents were confronting. Most parents were exhausted, overworked, raising a child as a single parent, fighting a drug or alcohol addiction, struggling with welfare, and worn down by poverty. Clearly, their reality was not accurately reflected by the watercolor language of the softly individualistic posters.

Social Class in Social Services

This same kind of soft-hard dissonance can be found not only among American working and upper classes in educational institutions, but also between predominantly middle-class social service providers and the lower- and working-class clients they serve. For example, as psychologist and author Mary Pipher notes, “Our Western mental health system is dependent on verbal expressiveness, self-disclosure, and a belief in individualism.” In her work with refugees resettling in the United States, Pipher observes that they often have more immediate concerns – work, sleep, housing, transportation – than dealing with past psychological pain. Many are also not used to speaking about their traumas so honestly with a stranger or are simply not used to speaking about their pain in a psychological (versus spiritual or physical) idiom.

Moreover, “Many working-class people see musing upon their own psyches as selfish, and see the therapists who insist that they do so as impolite,” says Barbara Jensen, a psychologist and trainer who has worked with lower- and working-class clients for over 30 years. She adds that many clients will endure “talk therapy,” though, if it is required for them to get the other resources that they perceive they need.



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Tell It Like It Is, or Tell It Like You Like?

One of the ways that working- and middle-class parents socialize hard versus soft individualism lies in how they help their children tell stories. On the one hand, middle-class parents of preschoolers allow their children to include incorrect or fantastical elements in their versions of stories, rather than correcting them. When they do correct their children's narratives, they do so gently and discreetly, so as not to impinge on the child's right to express his or her own view of the experience – a softly individualistic impulse.

For example, here is a conversation between a middle-class mother and her 3-year-old son, Tommy:

Mother: What was Megan dressed as?

Tommy: Um, um a pinecone.

Mother: Oh. A pinecone. ... You wanna know what it really ... what another name for it is?

Tommy: Yeah.

Mother: Unicorn. Megan was a unicorn because she had one horn coming out her nose, right? She was a unicorn.

Tommy: She was a unicorn fish!

On the other hand, working-class parents of preschoolers regularly challenge their children's stories, and neither soften their oppositions nor give in quickly. In this way, children get used to defending their versions of reality. Thus storytelling becomes a training ground on which preschoolers learn to defend themselves against affronts – a component of hard individualism.

For example, here is a conversation between a working-class mother and her 2½-year-old son, David:

Mother: What did we buy in the store yesterday for you?

David: Batman, da-na-na-na.

Mother: No, we didn't buy Batman.

David: Batman.

Mother: No, what are you, what did we buy yesterday in the store?

Source: A.R. Wiley, A.J. Rose, L.K. Burger, and P.J. Miller. "Constructing Autonomous Selves Through Narrative Practices: A Comparative Study of Working-Class and Middle-Class Families," *Child Development* 69 (1998): 833-847.

Jensen also warns that talk therapy can backfire. "If you haven't been trained to explore your feelings and your memories in this particular way," as is the case for many lower- and working-class clients, "you can be completely flooded by the experience." She recalls how the standard psychological technique of imagery work once had unintended effects: "To deal with unpleasant memories of childhood abuse, I would often ask women to visualize a wise woman inside of them. This usually works like a charm. But I was working with this lower-working-class woman, and when she envisioned her inner wise woman, [the image] turned around and attacked her. She had never done anything like it before, and so she was unaccustomed to, and frightened of, delving into her 'inner life.'"

The Clash of Hard and Soft Individualisms in Coalitions

The rift between hard and soft individualisms can also undermine very well intentioned social sector attempts at building cross-class coalitions. Betsy Leondar-Wright, a social justice activist and author of "Class Matters: Cross-Class Alliance Building for Middle-Class Activists,"⁸ recounts one such class clash: "I was facilitating a mid-Atlantic regional antinuclear meeting in 1979. There were about 50 people there – mostly white, mostly middle-class. We were planning a massive No Nukes march on Washington, D.C.

"Now keep in mind that this was '70s activist subculture – a lot of loose hair, a lot of cause-buttons, a lot of singing. We were doing our first go-round [of introductions], and to make it more playful, I had asked people to answer the question 'If you were an animal, what animal would you be?'

"Then in walked about six union guys, all with short hair, suits, and ties, from the United Mine Workers of America – an organization with the motivation and manpower to send thousands of protesters to the march. These guys didn't do animal names. They didn't do small groups. Their muckety-muck gave his speech, and then the union guys just walked out, most of them without saying a word." The UMWA did not send delegates to the D.C. march. "I knew I had done something wrong, but I didn't know what."

Over time Leondar-Wright came to understand that many activists' desire to get in touch with and express their quirky, wacky, creative side – while often a fine way to build camaraderie among middle-class coalitions – can estrange their working-class counterparts. In her workshops on building stronger cross-class coalitions, she now advises activists not to introduce these "inessential weirdnesses." "Most people get it," she says, "but some don't understand why you can't always just be yourself."

Movin' On Up to the East Side?

Social scientists, educators, and policymakers seem to assume that middle-class soft individualism is indeed the best and natural endpoint of development – of course a child should have her feelings mirrored, her unique talents discovered, her self



Reducing inequality requires that people first recognize their own class-based assumptions.

unfolded, and her Ph.D. granted. The understated American discourse on what to do about class divides therefore usually recommends that the lower classes assimilate to the middle-class norm.

Yet class is not something that can be wiped off like the frosting on a cake or relearned like a new sport. If soft and hard individualisms were extremely similar in their values and practices, this kind of relearning would not be so tough. But basic assumptions about the nature of the self, the future, and reality (e.g., Is the world safe or dangerous? Do people need to know and express their emotions to be happy? Can children handle teasing? How do you heal yourself?) are at the root of these differing styles.

As Philippe Bourgois notes in “In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio,” even when ex-crack dealers tried their hardest to keep low-level jobs in middle-class workplaces, they couldn’t change the ways they spoke, moved, and dressed enough to satisfy managers. After donning white button-down shirts, removing their gold chains, and cutting down on their swearing – all acts that called into question their sense of masculinity – these men still found that the better jobs of receptionist or plant caretaker were reserved for those who looked, spoke, and acted the middle-class part.

Assimilating to the middle class isn’t only difficult, it’s also painful. “Everyone talks about how wonderful upward mobility and the American dream are, but no one mentions the loss and the cost,” notes Felice Yeskel, co-director of Class Action, a nonprofit organization that works to raise awareness about the impact of class on individuals, relationships, and institutions. “People who change classes – what we call ‘straddlers’ – don’t feel at home in either their class of origin or in their new class.”

DeVol further explains why moving up and out hurts. “You have to give up relationships. You have to dump that guy. You have to stop listening to your mom. These transitions are seen as betrayals. The people you are leaving behind not only won’t support your transition, they will sabotage your efforts. When you begin transitioning, you have to replace that lost social capital.”

The pain of transitioning does not cause Ruby Payne to question its necessity. Payne is the founder and president of aha! Process, Inc., a company that teaches organizations about social class cultures. “When you are required by law to participate in middle-class institutions, like educational or legal institutions, and you don’t know the hidden rules of the middle class, you can get crucified,” she says. And while Payne’s company teaches both middle- and lower-class people about each other,

PHOTOGRAPH BY CHRISTOPHER BISSELL/GETTY IMAGES

