

## CHAPTER 27

### Social Class and Models of Competence

#### *How Gateway Institutions Disadvantage Working-Class Americans and How to Intervene*

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Brittany Bronson occupies an unusual space between social classes: university professor by day, Las Vegas waitress by night. In the pursuit of her middle-class academic aspirations she takes on a working-class<sup>1</sup> position, a “survival job” as she calls it, to make ends meet.

At times she finds herself in situations in which her two worlds collide: She encounters her middle- and upper-class students and their parents while at her waitressing job. She reflects on such encounters in this way:

Why do I still experience a great feeling of shame when clearing a student’s dirty plate? Embarrassment is not an adequate term to describe what I felt when those parents looked at me, clearly stupefied, thinking, “This waitress teaches my child?” It is a shame I share with many of my blue-collar colleagues, a belief that society deems our work inferior, that we have settled on or chosen these paths because we do not have the skills necessary to acquire something better. (Bronson, 2014, p. A35)

According to Bronson (2014), these meetings risk “destroying the facade of success”

that she presents to her students in the classroom. Even though Bronson and her restaurant colleagues know that their occupations are “skilled” and require a range of specific competencies to be effective, mainstream American society considers blue-collar work such as waitressing “unskilled” and inferior. As Bronson (2015) explains, although this type of work “requires a constant interaction with people, because of its low-paying status it is deemed a dead end, rather than a testament to an individual’s ability to acquire, adapt, and specialize” (p. A31). In other words, mainstream society does not recognize the skills involved in Bronson’s waitressing role as competence. Faced with this realization, she reports experiencing a sense of shame.

Bronson’s encounters with her students and their parents reveal an important but rarely recognized assumption about what types of skills count as competent in mainstream American society. Specifically, middle-class ways of being competent (e.g., the behaviors required by her role as a professor) are often seen as the only “right”

way to be competent. Yet, as Bronson's story suggests, there is more than one way to be competent. And, as we argue in this chapter, success in different social class contexts requires different ways of being competent. For example, to be competent in her working-class role as a waitress, Bronson must respond to the needs of her customers, adjust to changing situations, and rely on and provide support to her coworkers to get the job done. Alternatively, to be competent in her middle-class role as a university professor, Bronson must display confidence, take charge of the classroom, and express her opinions to her students.

In this chapter, we document and describe how social class shapes competence in four sections. Considering the context-contingent nature of competence, we adopt Elliot and Dweck's (2005) definition of competence as "a fundamental motivation that serves the evolutionary role of helping people develop and adapt to their environment" (p. 6). First, we examine how different social class contexts promote divergent understandings of how to be competent, which we refer to as *models of competence* (see Markus, Ryff, Curhan, & Palmersheim, 2004). Second, we provide evidence that the middle-class model of competence is institutionalized in society, while the working-class model of competence is often excluded. We do so by focusing on schools and workplaces—two institutions that evaluate individuals' competence and serve as gateways to upward mobility. In the third section, we show how this institutionalization of the middle-class model of competence can disadvantage working-class individuals by limiting access to opportunities, undermining their performance, and leading them to be evaluated as less competent. Finally, we propose interventions at both individual and institutional levels that have the potential to reduce some of the social class inequalities perpetuated by this reliance on the middle-class model of competence.

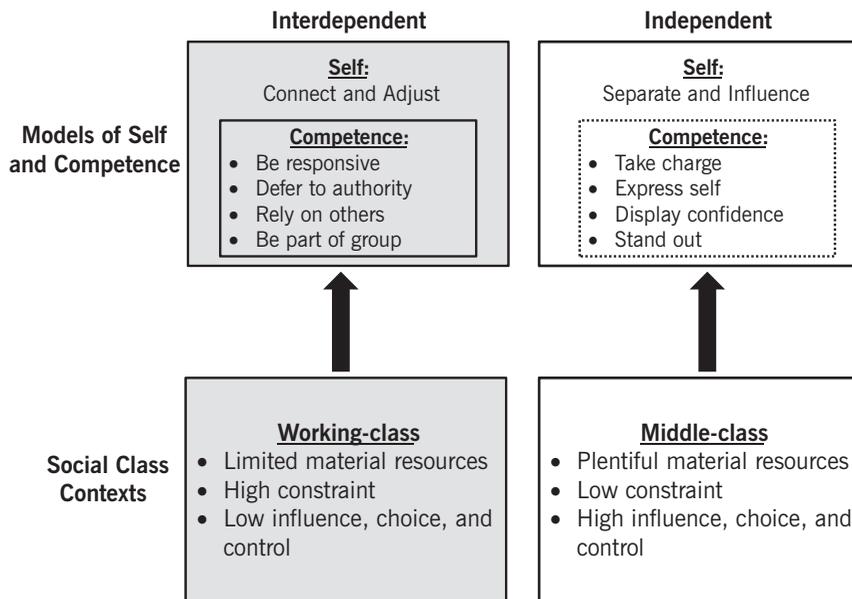
### **SOCIAL CLASS PROMOTES DIFFERENT MODELS OF COMPETENCE**

Social class contexts provide an important source of variation in models of competence.

These models of competence derive from culture-specific understandings of what it means to be a good or appropriate person in the world—what previous research has referred to as *models of self* (Cross & Madson, 1997; Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 2010). Research conducted in a variety of cultural contexts has identified two common models of self that provide different blueprints for how people should relate to others and to the social world, and, specifically, how to be competent (Adams, Anderson, & Adonu, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Plaut & Markus, 2005). An *independent* model of self assumes that a normatively appropriate person should influence the context, be separate from other people, and act freely based on personal motives, goals, and preferences (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). An *interdependent* model of self, in contrast, assumes that a normatively appropriate person should adjust to the conditions of the context, connect to others, and respond to the needs, preferences, and interests of others.

As outlined in Figure 27.1, understanding how different social class contexts promote these models of self and competence requires an analysis of available material resources (e.g., income, access to high-quality education) and social resources (e.g., relationships with family and friends). These conditions are important because they shape the possible patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting in the world, as well as the ways of being that are most likely to be effective in different social contexts. How people are able to act over time will shape the ways of being a person that are likely to become normative and preferred.

Middle-class American contexts promote an independent model of self and competence (see Figure 27.1). People in middle-class contexts have greater economic capital, fewer environmental constraints, higher power and status, and more opportunities for choice, influence, and control than do people in working-class contexts (Day & Newburger, 2002; Kohn, 1969; Pattillo-McCoy, 1999; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1991). They also tend to have higher levels of geographic mobility, given the need to move away from home to attend college and to pursue subsequent career opportunities



**FIGURE 27.1.** Social class contexts shape models of self and competence.

(Argyle, 1994). These material realities promote socialization practices that convey to children a sense of self-importance and individual entitlement (Miller, Cho, & Bracey, 2005). For example, parents often engage in *concerted cultivation*, or efforts to identify and encourage their children's personal preferences, ideas, and opinions (Lareau, 2003). Through these interactions, parents convey to children the message that “the world is your oyster” and “your voice matters.”

In response to these material and social conditions, middle-class individuals have ample opportunities to influence the situation, to make choices according to their own personal preferences, to develop confidence and a sense of optimism, and to express their ideas and opinions. Over time, these ways of being foster a sense of self as autonomous or separate from others and as able to influence the world according to personal preferences. As shown in Figure 27.1, an independent model of competence stresses that individuals should take charge of their environments, express what they think and feel, show confidence, and stand out from the group. Thus, when Bronson operates in her role as a university professor, she enacts an independent model of competence and is

therefore seen as competent by her middle-class students and peers.

Working-class contexts, on the other hand, promote an interdependent model of self and competence (see Figure 27.1). People in working-class contexts have less access to economic capital, confront more environmental constraints, are exposed to greater risks and uncertainty, and have fewer opportunities for choice, influence, and control than do people in middle-class contexts (Chen & Matthews, 2001; Lachman & Weaver, 1998; Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). Working-class individuals do not typically move away to attend college, so they often stay in the same geographic location for their entire lives, frequently interact with family members, and tend to be embedded in densely structured social networks (Argyle, 1994; Lamont, 2000; Markus et al., 2004). These material realities often promote socialization practices that encourage children to recognize their place in the social hierarchy, to follow rules and social norms, and to be responsive to others' needs (Fiske & Markus, 2012; Kohn, 1969; Kusserow, 1999; Lamont, 2000; Piff, Kraus, Côté, Cheng, & Keltner, 2010; Stephens, Fryberg, & Markus, 2011). For example, parents in

working-class contexts often emphasize to their children that “it’s not just about you” and “you can’t always get what you want” (Miller et al., 2005; Snibbe & Markus, 2005).

In response to these material and social conditions, working-class individuals must adjust themselves to the social context, be tough and strong, and rely on close others (e.g., family, friends) for support (Stephens, Markus, & Phillips, 2014). Over time, these ways of being foster a sense of self as connected to others and as adjusting to one’s environment (Markus & Kitayama, 2003). As shown in Figure 27.1, an interdependent model of competence assumes that individuals should be responsive to the social context, show deference to authority, rely on and support others, and be part of the group. Thus, when Bronson and her restaurant coworkers engage in such behaviors, they enact an interdependent model of competence and will be seen as competent in the eyes of other working-class individuals. Yet from the perspective of middle-class colleagues or students, their ways of being competent would go unseen or be devalued.

### THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE INDEPENDENT MODEL OF COMPETENCE

Although both independent and interdependent models of competence are viable ways of being a person, U.S. institutions tend primarily to endorse and value the independent model. Indeed, U.S. institutions ranging from the media to politics reflect an independent model (e.g., Adams, Biernat, Branscombe, Crandall, & Wrightsman, 2008; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Iyengar, 2010; Markus & Conner, 2013). We focus here on how the independent model organizes two critical gateway institutions: schools and workplaces (Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012). Schools and workplaces play crucial roles in providing access to valued life opportunities (e.g., influential social networks) and upward social mobility. The ideas, practices, and standards of evaluation that are prevalent in these key gateway institutions are not neutral; rather, they reflect an independent model of how to be a competent student

or employee. Importantly, institutions that focus exclusively on the independent model miss out on some of the individual and organizational benefits of interdependence (Hambrick, 1995). For example, institutions are less likely to engage effectively in activities that are necessary to maximize their performance, such as encouraging collaboration and working toward shared goals (Duhigg, 2016; Woolley, Chabris, Pentland, Hashmi, & Malone, 2010).

U.S. institutions of higher education reflect and promote an independent model of competence as the cultural ideal. In a survey of administrators at a diverse range of research universities and liberal arts colleges, the vast majority reported that their institutions expect students to enact an independent model of competence—to pave their own paths, to challenge norms and rules, to express their personal preferences, and to work independently (Fryberg & Markus, 2007; Stephens, Markus, & Fryberg, 2012). Indeed, institutions of higher education tend to focus on the importance of exploring and developing personal interests, and offer students the opportunity to structure their coursework and activities in a way that aligns with their preferences. Thus, an independent model of competence guides administrators’ and educators’ assumptions about how students should be motivated, learn, and interact with peers and professors. By setting up particular expectations about how good students should behave, an independent model serves as the standard against which educators are likely to interpret and evaluate students’ behavior.

Universities promote this standard by encouraging and rewarding students for the development of specialized skills and patterns of behavior (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1982). In many university classrooms, for example, class participation is a significant part of students’ final grades and also contributes to how professors evaluate students’ potential more generally. This widespread practice reveals how an independent model of competence—in this case, the act of expressing one’s own thoughts, ideas, and opinions—is institutionalized in U.S. higher education and dictates what it means to be a good or competent student (Kim, 2002).

The standard is communicated not only by interactions inside the classroom with peers and professors but also by messages contained in cultural products such as university guidebooks, brochures, and application materials. For example, Yale University's admissions website advises applicants to "pursue what you love and tell us about that. Be yourself." Dartmouth College's site stresses, "What will impress us is YOU. You, letting your application express some aspect of your own story. You've established a great track record. Let your application clearly reflect your interests and motivation." The advice that these universities offer to applicants is guided by the assumption that "qualified" or "competent" students will have the skills to identify and communicate their personal interests—behaviors that are socialized largely in middle-class contexts. By contrast, the interdependent competencies fostered by many working-class contexts (e.g., working together, building community) are largely absent from these university materials. Promoting independent behaviors as the cultural ideal can indeed encourage the development of skills that are important for success in U.S. society. However, focusing exclusively on independence can hinder the development of interdependent competencies—working together on research and class projects, building relationships in extracurricular activities, and supporting one's classmates—that have the potential to enhance students' relational and achievement outcomes (Hackman & Katz, 2010; Hilk, 2013).

An independent model of competence informs not only higher education but also middle-class, professional workplaces that may provide a path to upward mobility in U.S. society for working-class individuals. Managers and other employees in professional firms tend to value employees who take charge and influence the situation, confidently express their ideas and opinions, and promote themselves (Anderson, Brion, Moore, & Kennedy, 2012; Anderson, John, Keltner, & Kring, 2001; Anderson & Kilduff, 2009; Kennedy, Anderson, & Moore, 2013; Van Kleef, Homan, Finkenauer, Gündemir, & Stamkou, 2011). These settings often focus on the importance of personal autonomy and offer employees the opportunity to

craft their job (i.e., to shape it in a way that aligns with their individual needs and interests; Berg, Wrzesniewski, & Dutton, 2010; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). For example, on the website of the investment bank Morgan Stanley, an employee described the type of person who would be effective in the company: "This is a great environment for the self-starter, someone who relishes a lot of autonomy, and seeks to do things the way they think is best. If you have initiative, you can take it and run. The firm will support that and reward that quality." This independent model of competence also guides managers' assumptions about how employees should be motivated, develop skills, and interact with colleagues. By setting up particular expectations about how good employees should behave, an independent model serves as the standard against which managers are likely to interpret and evaluate employees' behavior.

Workplaces tend to promote this standard by encouraging and rewarding workers for the independent competencies they seek to cultivate (Bacon & Storey, 1996; Cooke & Rousseau, 1988; Friedlander, 1965; Hyman, 1994; Lamont, 2000; Urtasun & Núñez, 2012). Even before individuals join an organization, managers and employees expect job applicants to enact an independent model of competence: to ask questions, to express their preferences, and to take risks. Once applicants are hired, these expectations of independence are reinforced further. For example, all team members at Amazon are ranked annually, and those at the bottom are eliminated (Kantor & Streitfeld, 2015). Reflecting an independent model of competence, this system encourages all employees to focus primarily on their individual performance—rather than on the needs of their team or the organization—and to direct their efforts toward outperforming one another. Similarly, Microsoft employees are encouraged to compete with each other. As one employee recounted, "If you were on a team of 10 people, you walked in the first day knowing that, no matter how good everyone was, two people were going to get a great review, seven were going to get mediocre reviews, and one was going to get a terrible review. . . . It leads to employees focusing on competing with

each other rather than competing with other companies” (Eichenwald, 2012, para. 162). This employee review practice, which is known as the “bell curve,” focuses on zero-sum individual performance rather than on teams working toward a common goal. Notably, this practice eventually played a role in undermining Microsoft’s ability to keep up with its competitors (Evans & Dion, 1991; Guzzo & Dickson, 1996).

This independent standard can also be conveyed through cultural products such as company websites or recruiting and hiring practices. Company websites, for example, are saturated with messages that competent applicants or employees must display independence to be successful in the future. The recruiting homepage of Deloitte states: “What’s great about the people? . . . Each person is unique and valued for that, among the best and brightest in the business, and takes pride in his or her achievements.” Similarly, an employee on Goldman Sachs’s website declares that managers “pride themselves on empowering their employees to be creative and to develop solutions to problems at any level.” The employee then goes on to say, “This is a place where I can select the opportunities I’m interested in, instead of waiting for the organization to decide for me.” In both of these examples, the organizations portray a competent employee as one who has the skills to stand out from others, showcase personal achievements, and take charge of the workplace by making decisions. Largely absent from these messages is an interdependent model of competence, even though harnessing employees’ interdependent competencies (e.g., collaborating in teams, having shared goals, supporting one’s colleagues) has great potential to add value to organizations.

### **RELIANCE ON AN INDEPENDENT MODEL OF COMPETENCE DISADVANTAGES WORKING-CLASS AMERICANS**

Schools’ and workplaces’ reliance on an independent model of competence can reduce upward mobility and perpetuate social class inequality by creating a *cultural mismatch* for working-class individuals, who are more often guided by an interdependent model

of competence (Stephens, Markus, et al., 2014). The exclusion of an interdependent model can inadvertently signal to working-class individuals that gateway institutions are not places for people “like them.” This perceived lack of fit can in turn undermine working-class individuals’ opportunity to succeed in those settings.

In this section, we suggest that working-class individuals experience a cultural mismatch in these gateway institutions in three important domains: (1) *access*, (2) *performance*, and (3) *evaluation*. The disadvantages that these institutions produce can build on one another and create a cycle that perpetuates inequality.

#### **Access**

The experience of cultural mismatch may lead individuals from working-class backgrounds to be less motivated to take actions needed to gain access (e.g., apply) to gateway institutions. This mismatch could lead working-class individuals to (1) recognize less often the potential contributions of their own skills in these settings, and (2) feel that they are not welcome or that they do not fit in these settings. Both of these experiences could lead working-class individuals to conclude that they are unlikely to be admitted or hired if they apply, and that even if they were hired, they would be unlikely to benefit from the experience.

#### **Lack of Recognition of Potential Contribution**

A cultural mismatch may demotivate working-class individuals from gaining access to gateway institutions, which signals that interdependent competencies will likely be ineffective there. In the context of higher education, working-class high school students who do not see their model of competence included in the college setting may infer that they do not have the skills necessary to succeed. They may surmise this from perusing college websites that describe the “type” of (middle-class) student who is likely to be admitted (e.g., one who “has pride in individual accomplishments”). Similarly, successful college graduates from working-class backgrounds who do not see their model of competence included in a workplace may

conclude that they do not have the skills to pursue a position in that company. Notably, the most lucrative, high-status occupations are most likely to reflect and promote an independent model of competence (Acker, 2006; Sutton & Hargadon, 1996; Williams, 2012; Wojcicki, 2011).

### *Anticipated Lack of Fit*

A cultural mismatch may also demotivate working-class individuals from gaining access to gateway institutions by leading them to believe that people “like them” are unlikely to fit in the setting. Highlighting the relevance of this concern in higher education, Michael Gove, the United Kingdom’s former education secretary, notes that working-class students’ “worries about ‘not fitting in’ will be one reason why [they will be] less likely to apply to the most selective universities” (Graham, 2014, para. 15). These concerns persist beyond college and can impact people’s interest in various occupations. Rather than strive to gain admission into certain high-status, lucrative occupations, working-class individuals may instead choose to withdraw from “the game” (e.g., Gray & Kish-Gephart, 2013). These individuals may conclude that there is no point in applying for such opportunities if they imagine that they will never truly belong.

### *Performance*

A cultural mismatch can even undermine the performance of working-class individuals who defy the odds and gain access to higher education and white-collar workplaces. As we explain below, this mismatch may undermine their performance in two ways: (1) They have less experience enacting the skills associated with an independent model, and (2) they lack a sense of comfort and fit in the setting.

### *Less Experience Enacting an Independent Model of Competence*

A cultural mismatch can undermine working-class individuals’ performance by encouraging them to enact an independent model of competence with which they are likely to have less experience. Upon gaining

entry to key gateway institutions, the prevalence of an independent model likely communicates that enacting independent norms is the only right way to be competent. Working-class students tend to have less exposure to and experience with cultural norms of independence. They also tend to know less about the often-implicit “rules of the game” for these independent norms (cf. Bourdieu, 1984; Ridgeway, 2014). Thus, working-class students may find enacting these cultural norms especially difficult. For example, many college students from working-class backgrounds report difficulty choosing a major, developing and expressing their own ideas in class, and planning out their schedules to manage multiple and often competing demands on their time (e.g., papers and exams). As one working-class student put it, “While my college had done an excellent job recruiting me, I had no road map for what I was supposed to do once I made it to campus” (Capó Crucet, 2015, p. SR6). Even though this student successfully gained access to higher education, her lack of previous experience enacting independence left her unsure of what she needed to do to become a “good” college student.

Often, the experience of not knowing the right way to act does not end with college graduation. Rather, the impact of one’s social class background persists far beyond college, even for those who have successfully navigated their way through college and into a middle-class profession (cf. Kish-Gephart & Campbell, 2014). Consider the “outsider” experience of Della Mae Justice, a successful Kentucky lawyer who was raised in poverty in Appalachia. Justice continues to experience difficulty in middle-class settings, and explains how she still spends time “wondering if I’m wearing the right thing, if I’ll know what to do. I’m always thinking: How does everybody else know that? How do they know how to act? Why do they all seem so at ease?” (Lewin, 2005, para. 64). Despite her middle-class success, Justice continues to question whether she has the skills or cultural capital necessary to be accepted.

### *Lack of Fit*

A cultural mismatch may also undermine working-class individuals’ performance by

reducing their comfort and sense of fit with the setting. In the context of higher education, students who feel that their ways of being competent are not valued by their college or university are likely to experience less fit and question whether they can be successful there (e.g., Johnson, Richeson, & Finkel, 2011; Ostrove & Long, 2007). These feelings of discomfort can prevent students from performing up to their potential. Stephens and colleagues (2012) illustrated this process in a laboratory experiment in which we exposed working-class students to a welcome letter that framed their university's expectations in terms of either independence (cultural mismatch) or interdependence (cultural match), and examined the consequences for students' experience and performance (Stephens, Fryberg, Markus, Johnson, & Covarrubias, 2012; Stephens, Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). Stephens and colleagues found that the independent framing decreased working-class students' academic comfort, as indexed by self-reported difficulty of the task, compared with the interdependent framing. Furthermore, their lower levels of comfort hindered their performance on academic tasks (e.g., anagrams). Moreover, in a longitudinal study in which they followed students throughout their 4 years in college, the authors found that the experience of cultural mismatch reduced working-class students' sense of fit not only at the beginning of college but also throughout college until graduation (Phillips, Stephens, Townsend, & Goudeau 2016). Their reduced fit, in turn, predicted lower grades at the end of college. Together, these studies suggest that one way a cultural mismatch can undermine working-class students' performance is by undermining their sense of fit.

This lack of fit often persists after graduation and can undermine employees' performance as they transition into the workplace. For example, Andrea Todd, a former magazine writer from a working-class background, explains, "I finally just dropped out. . . . It was too many years of *not belonging*. I never made a real, true friend, someone to count on. I was from a different class and they never wanted to know the real me" (cited in Lubrano, 2004, p. 155, emphasis added). Even though Todd was able to gain

access to a middle-class job, over time, her lack of belonging likely hindered her ability to perform up to her potential and led her to leave.

### Evaluation

Finally, even if individuals from working-class backgrounds gain access and perform well on the job, the evaluation process may further disadvantage them. Middle-class evaluators' reliance on an independent model of competence may make it difficult to recognize the skills and potential contributions of working-class individuals, whom they may evaluate as incompetent (cf. Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002). As we describe below, this may occur even when working-class individuals perform as well as their middle-class counterparts on objective measures of performance.

When evaluating the competence and achievements of working-class individuals, an independent model of competence is likely to shape the views of middle-class observers. Accordingly, when middle-class individuals observe people enacting an independent model of competence (e.g., taking charge), they are likely to value these behaviors. In contrast, they are likely to devalue behaviors that instead reflect an interdependent model of competence (e.g., being socially responsive; cf. Ridgeway & Fisk, 2012; Stephens, Hamedani, Markus, Bergsieker, & Eloul, 2009). For example, colleges and universities recognize students for independent research projects and studying abroad but "don't recognize, in the same way, if you work at the neighborhood 7-Eleven to support your family," notes Anthony Marx, former president of Amherst College (Leonhardt, 2011, p. B1). Similarly, employees in professional work contexts such as law or banking who enact interdependence (e.g., mentor their colleagues or act as team players) may not have their contributions and skills recognized.

Evaluators' failure to recognize the interdependent competencies common among many working-class individuals may further bias their overall assessment of these individuals' abilities and their future potential. For example, even when working-class students perform as well as their middle-class

counterparts on standard performance measures (e.g., exams), they may still be evaluated as less competent overall (e.g., on their final grade in a class; cf. Darley & Gross, 1983). Likewise, working-class employees who enact interdependence may appear less qualified for a promotion or future opportunities compared with equally qualified employees who primarily enact independence (Stephens, Markus, et al., 2014; see also Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014). Consistent with this suggestion, Rudman and Glick (1999) found that hypothetical job applicants who endorsed an interdependent orientation (e.g., helping others as a source of accomplishment) were evaluated more poorly and were seen as less hireable than those who endorsed an independent orientation (e.g., wanting to be in charge and to make decisions).

In summary, cultural mismatch effects are likely to disadvantage working-class individuals in three important domains—access, performance, and evaluation—that fuel and perpetuate a cycle of social class inequality.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR INTERVENTIONS AIMED AT REDUCING SOCIAL CLASS INEQUALITY IN GATEWAY INSTITUTIONS**

To overcome this cycle of inequality that disadvantages working-class individuals, interventions should focus on reducing the mismatch between the independent model of competence that is normative in gateway institutions and the interdependent model of competence that tends to guide the behavior of working-class individuals. The divergence in cultural norms at individual and institutional levels produces this mismatch; therefore, we propose interventions at each of the following levels: (1) individual-level interventions aimed at developing an independent model of competence, and (2) institutional-level interventions aimed at helping institutions to create a more inclusive culture of competence. These individual and institutional interventions should reduce cultural mismatch, thereby increasing working-class individuals' sense of fit in gateway institutions and also empowering them with the skills that they need to be successful (cf. Stephens, Brannon, Markus, & Nelson, 2015).

While we focus here on the importance of increasing fit and providing individuals with skills to better navigate gateway institutions, these psychological changes will undoubtedly have a variety of other downstream consequences for working-class individuals' opportunity to succeed. For example, just as these interventions will encourage working-class individuals to recognize their own potential contribution, so too will they enable evaluators to recognize competence in working-class individuals.

To the best of our knowledge, there are no interventions that perfectly address the cultural mismatch in models of competence that individuals experience in gateway institutions. However, several existing interventions provide useful frameworks for the development of such interventions. We first describe examples of effective interventions at the individual and institutional levels. We then draw on the insights offered by these interventions in proposing specific intervention strategies that could be harnessed to address the mismatch in models of competence and thereby reduce social class inequality.

#### ***Individual-Level Interventions***

Because working-class individuals are less familiar with and have less experience enacting an independent model of competence, targeted interventions could help working-class individuals become bicultural—that is, teach them to enact an independent model in situations that demand it (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1993). Such efforts can equip students and employees with the skills they need to be successful in gateway institutions. At the same time, knowing the right skills and how to enact them will foster a greater sense of belonging in gateway institutions. Strategies to develop an independent model might include raising awareness about how social class shapes models of competence, and helping working-class individuals develop an independent model of competence (e.g., by giving them opportunities to practice these behaviors). *Difference-education* is one approach that could be adapted for these purposes (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Stephens, Townsend, Hamedani, Destin, & Manzo, 2015).

*Example: The Difference-Education Approach*

In an intervention conducted during the college transition, incoming working-class and middle-class students attended a 1-hour student panel in which junior and senior students discussed the ways in which their social class backgrounds impacted their college experience. Specifically, they described the obstacles they encountered, as well as the strengths and strategies they leveraged to be successful during their time in college (see Stephens, Markus, et al., 2014). Afterward, intervention participants completed a brief video testimonial that gave them the opportunity to process what they had learned at the panel. At the end of their first year, working-class students who attended this panel reported a greater sense of fit with their university. They also enacted more of the independent behaviors (e.g., took charge of their experience by taking advantage of college resources) that were required to reach their academic potential. As a result of these behavioral changes, they earned significantly better grades than working-class students who did not attend the panel, which effectively eliminated the social class achievement gap between students. By highlighting how social class background mattered for the college experience, the intervention increased working-class students' awareness of the university's expectations of them and helped them begin to develop the skills and strategies they needed to be most effective in middle-class university settings.

*Raising Awareness*

As revealed in the difference-education intervention approach, one viable strategy to develop an independent model of competence among working-class individuals is to focus on raising awareness. To address the mismatch in models of competence, working-class individuals entering gateway institutions could be made aware of how social class influences models of competence; that is, they could benefit from learning that there is more than one effective model of competence, and that different social class contexts afford different models. Because the independent model is often taken for granted, working-class individuals may not

understand what assumptions the model includes. To make these "rules of the game" visible, individuals should talk openly about expectations and requirements for success in schools and workplaces. Efforts to raise awareness of this independent model of competence will help working-class individuals understand that their interdependent model is not a sign of deficiency and is normal for those who come from a working-class background. This understanding should help them experience a greater sense of fit in their schools and workplaces, and also recognize the additional skills that they need to develop to succeed in middle-class settings.

Formal and informal channels could be utilized to increase awareness. For example, college advisors could be trained to better understand the shared needs of working-class students and to provide them with the structured mentoring they need to become more familiar with the "rules of the game." Advisors could also be trained to share insights about behaviors that are expected and associated with achievement and future opportunities. Alternatively, students could become more aware of the rules from their peers. Upon entering college, working-class students could be paired up with liaisons or buddies who have been trained to give students the inside story on what college is about and how to be successful there. These liaisons could have either working-class or middle-class backgrounds. Stanford University's First-Generation Low Income Partnership (FLIP) program, for example, pairs current FLIP members with incoming students. The more advanced students mentor the incoming students, answering questions and providing information. Similarly, in workplaces, onboarding practices could be tailored to help people from working-class backgrounds better understand what is expected of them. For example, at Clear Channel Communications, new hires are paired with a "peer coach," who is available to answer questions before their official start date. These peer coaches could be trained to help new hires from working-class backgrounds understand the environment and culture of the company, and what types of behaviors are rewarded and viewed as competent.

### *Enacting an Independent Model of Competence*

As the difference-education approach illustrates, a viable strategy to promote an independent model of competence is to help working-class individuals enact the strategies they need to be effective in middle-class settings. Just as the difference-education intervention provided students with strategies that helped them succeed at their university, future interventions should go one step further: They could give working-class individuals a chance to practice the skills associated with an independent model of competence. Doing so will not only equip working-class students and employees with these skills but also help them to become more comfortable with the independent model.

Workplaces and schools could offer workshops or training sessions, in which working-class individuals can enact the independent model and obtain feedback on their performance. An example of this can be seen in One Goal, a college preparatory program that employs role-playing exercises that allow students to practice strategies that will help them be more effective in college. Such an experience could teach students how to express an opinion in class, talk to professors about possible research opportunities, and seek help from a teaching assistant. Similarly, training programs in the workplace could offer employees practice enacting independent behaviors and give them feedback on their efforts. For example, in their investigation of assertiveness training, Smith-Jentsch, Salas, and Baker (1996) found that both practice and feedback were critical for enhancing assertive behavior. Thus, rather than simply giving working-class individuals written materials or lectures on desired behaviors, interventions should provide them with the opportunity actually to engage in and receive feedback on the independent behaviors they must enact to be perceived as competent.

### *Institutional-Level Interventions*

Because gateway institutions contribute to the mismatch by promoting the independent model of competence as the norm, interventions targeted at an institutional level could

also create a more inclusive culture of competence. Doing so will increase working-class individuals' sense of fit and inclusion in gateway institutions. At the same time, this more inclusive culture may lead middle-class evaluators to recognize the interdependent behaviors enacted by working-class individuals as a form of competence. This recognition of interdependent skills such as working together and adjusting to others, in turn, could benefit institutions by fostering group as well as individual performance (Hambrick, 1995). Organizations can create a more inclusive culture by broadening their understandings of competence to include the interdependent model and incentivizing interdependent behaviors. One institutional-level intervention that could be tailored to accomplish this goal is the *relational design* approach (Grant et al., 2007).

### *Example: The Relational Design Approach*

In this intervention, a university call center sought to improve employee persistence and job performance by changing the cultural norms for how organizations motivate employees. While call centers typically motivate their employees using an individual-focused perspective (e.g., setting individual goals to maximize donations), in this intervention the call center gave employees a relational, prosocial reason for their work. Specifically, they offered employees the opportunity to interact in person with a student beneficiary of their fund-raising calling efforts. Employees were called into a break room for a 10-minute session and asked to read a letter from a student beneficiary about how receiving the scholarship had made a difference in his or her life. Then the student beneficiary was invited into the room to answer callers' questions about the student's background and future plans. Before being excused, supervisors remarked to the callers: "Remember this when you're on the phone—this is someone you're supporting." One month later, callers in the intervention condition spent significantly more time on the phone and raised more money than individuals who did not interact with a beneficiary in person. By focusing on relational motives (e.g., working together) rather than on purely

individual goals (e.g., outperforming one another), the intervention conveyed that the interdependent model of competence would be respected and included in the workplace. This approach could be similarly employed in more elite professions such as law, consulting, or investment banking. For example, lawyers or investment bankers could be reminded of the benefits to their clients. And, even if employees are not helping individuals directly, they might be reminded of the ways in which their efforts would benefit their communities or society more broadly, perhaps via incentive structures such as prosocial bonuses, in which organizations award money to others rather than to the employees themselves (Anik, Aknin, Norton, Dunn, & Quoidbach, 2013).

#### *Change Incentive Structure*

As revealed in the relational design intervention, one strategy to create a more inclusive organizational culture is to change the incentives that are used to motivate students or employees. Traditional incentive approaches, which provide rewards at an individual level (e.g., a bonus for individual performance), could be altered to encourage and reward interdependent behaviors (e.g., working together, helping others) that are often productive in schools and workplaces.

As shown in the Amazon and Microsoft examples, individual-level incentives tend to promote individual-focused behaviors and encourage people to focus exclusively on their own interests.

However, alternative incentives could communicate the importance of behaviors linked to an interdependent model of competence. For example, in the restaurant industry, there are two prevalent models of tip distribution among waitstaff: (1) the typical individual approach, in which each individual keeps all the tips that she earns each shift, or (2) a team-based approach, in which all tips earned by all staff on a given night are pooled and distributed evenly among all workers. The fact that outcomes are jointly determined in the team-based approach encourages waitstaff to work together and to rely on and support one another in the shared goal of improving customers' experience and satisfaction. Similarly, research

on top management teams (TMTs) showcases how interdependence can benefit both employees and organizations (Hambrick, 1995). One CEO decided to make the incentive compensation of all team members uniform, explaining, "The performance of every one of these executives depends heavily on the others. If I want them to work collaboratively, as a team, it creates severe problems to try to reward them differentially" (p. 123). Three years after this change, the team members exhibited great success in their collaborative efforts and in the marketplace more generally. Incentivizing employees at a team level signals that the interdependent model of competence is valued, and can thereby increase working-class individuals' sense of fit in the workplace.

#### *Changing Evaluation Standards to Include Interdependence*

The relational design approach illustrates another strategy to create a more inclusive organizational culture: Change the evaluation process so that the criteria are more inclusive of interdependence. Interviewers in many U.S. organizations, for instance, do not have clear standards for evaluating abstract qualities such as motivation or ability. Instead, they often draw heavily from their own personal experiences to determine who is likely to be the "best" hire (Rivera, 2012). The largely middle-class evaluators of gateway institutions naturally draw from an independent model of what it means to be competent to make these judgments. Thus, including more specific and interdependent indicators of competence can counteract the inclination to rely exclusively on the independent model.

Interviewers could implement this practice when deciding whom to admit or hire, and when evaluating students and employees. Instead of asking vague questions (e.g., "How competent is this individual?"), evaluators could consider specific behaviors that reflect not only independent but also interdependent ways of being competent. For example, in addition to asking, "How effective is this individual at taking charge of projects?" evaluators could ask, "How skilled is this individual at collaborating with others?" or "How effective is this

employee at supporting other employees?” Indeed, research suggests that instituting more formal policies (e.g., creating standardized, specific criteria for evaluation) can reduce bias in important decisions in the context of organizations’ hiring (Reskin & McBrier, 2000) and compensation (Elvira & Graham, 2002). By evaluating individuals in a way that acknowledges the value of interdependence, this strategy should communicate to students and employees from working-class backgrounds that they are likely to fit and perform well in these gateway settings. Additionally, these changes will likely enable middle-class evaluators to recognize more fully the talents and range of skills of their future students or employees from both working- and middle-class backgrounds.

In summary, interventions that help working-class individuals develop an independent model of competence and create more inclusive cultures should increase their comfort and fit in these institutions, and equip them with the skills necessary to better navigate these settings.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The American Dream stresses that any individual who wants to work hard in pursuit of a better life can succeed by effectively navigating school and the workplace. Yet, as we have documented throughout this chapter, these gateway institutions have “become a powerful force for reinforcing advantage and passing it on through generations” (Pérez-Peña, 2014, p. A1). These institutions produce intergenerational inequality by relying primarily on an independent model of competence, while excluding the interdependent model of competence more common among the working class. As described earlier, this cultural mismatch in models of competence can disadvantage working-class Americans and perpetuate inequality in three key ways that reinforce one another. First, a mismatch can reduce working-class individuals’ motivation to gain access to these settings. Second, among the working-class individuals who defy the odds and gain access to higher education or professional workplaces, a

cultural mismatch can hinder their ability to perform up to their potential in these settings. Third, a cultural mismatch can make it more difficult for evaluators (e.g., admissions officers, human resource professionals) to recognize the interdependent competencies of working-class individuals (e.g., their ability to work together).

Changes in mainstream society’s definitions and evaluations of competence will not happen overnight, but both individuals and institutions can take concrete steps to reduce the cultural mismatch in models of competence that fuels inequality. Future interventions should aim to help working-class individuals understand and enact the independent model of competence that institutions frequently take for granted. At the same time, interventions can expand institutional definitions of competence to include interdependence, thereby creating a more comfortable and welcoming environment in which working-class individuals will be more likely to thrive. By changing the ways in which institutions define and evaluate competence (e.g., by including the interdependent model), perhaps mainstream American society will consider the possibility that there is more than one way to be a competent student or employee, and that both independent and interdependent approaches carry advantages in all contexts. Guided by this insight, perhaps Bronson and her working-class colleagues will no longer experience shame for being seen as incompetent in the eyes of others, and instead begin to feel valued for their contribution—both in working-class settings and beyond.

## NOTE

1. To incorporate diverse interdisciplinary literatures that define social class differently, we use the term *working-class* to refer to individuals in contexts on the bottom half of the social class divide, including people who have attained less than a 4-year college degree or who have relatively low incomes or lower-status occupations. *Middle-class* refers to individuals in contexts on the top half of the social class divide, including people who have attained at least a 4-year college degree or who have relatively high incomes or higher-status occupations.

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