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Gender, social class, and women's employment

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People in low-power positions, whether due to gender or class, tend to exhibit other-oriented rather than self-oriented behavior. Women's experiences at work and at home are shaped by social class, heightening identification with gender for relatively upper class women and identification with class for relatively lower class women, potentially mitigating, or even reversing, class-based differences documented in past research. Gender–class differences are reflected in women's employment beliefs and behaviors. Research integrating social class with gendered experiences in homes and workplaces deepens our understanding of the complex interplay between sources of power and status in society.

Addresses

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Introduction

Women increasingly engage in paid employment. Labor force participation rates among women aged 25–54 across OECD countries rose from 54% in 1980 to over 72% by 2015 [1,2]. Studies of men's and women's employment across countries and cohorts expose two clear patterns: the work pathways of men and women diverge as parenthood approaches and diverge even further after childbirth [3,4]; and women's wage trajectories and labor force participation rates exhibit rising intra-cohort variation over time [5,6]. Family background and status play a measurable role in women's preparation for and decisions related to paid employment [7,8,9]. Women with post-secondary education, a marker of higher social class, are increasingly more likely to be employed than less-educated women [10]. Overall, social stratification, together with gender ideologies and work–family constraints, shape women's employment beliefs and behavior [11,12].

The central purpose of this article is to integrate recent gender research, suggesting both social class (or 'class') and gender shape women's approach to employment, into current social psychological research on class-based identification with self versus other. Class effects may be substantially weaker for women than for men: people in relatively low-power positions, whether due to gender or class, tend to exhibit other-oriented rather than self-oriented behavior [13]. We also explore the possibility that women's employment beliefs and behavior may demonstrate a reversal of the class-based orientations documented in social psychology, in response to class-based pressures in the social contexts women face at work and at home.

As we consider the interplay between gender and class, we rely on Wood and Eagly's [14, p. 630] definition of *gender* as meanings and associated expectations 'that individuals and societies ascribe to males and females.' Gender (in contrast to biological categorizations) is rooted in the historical and enduring division of labor between women and men [14]. As such, gender is dynamically constructed and reconstructed through psychological, interactional, institutional, and cultural means [15].

Social class, like gender, generates meanings and expectations ascribed to objective characteristics of individuals [16]. We adopt Côté's [17, p. 5] definition of *social class* as 'a dimension of the self that is rooted in objective material resources (income, education, and occupational prestige) and corresponding subjective perceptions of rank vis-à-vis others. Social class reflects individuals' mental representations . . . of who they are, how they should relate to others, and what they should be doing . . . [leading], in turn, to specific patterns of action and cognition.' Social stratification into classes reflects relative economic relationships across individuals within a society [18], both perceived and actual. At the household level, the most common measures of class are based on household wealth and total income (earnings); individual-level indicators include own and parents' income, education, occupation, and subjective assessments [16].

A growing literature in social psychology characterizes middle and upper class individuals as independent and in control of their own destinies, and lower class individuals as group-minded and reliant on others [19–21]. Scholars offer evidence that these differences stem from class-based experiences leading to distinctions in the emphasis on self versus other [22]. Individuals' habitation within the class structure constrains and enables not just opportunities, but also cognition [16], shaping constructions of

appropriate choices and what it means to be a good person [23].

Absent consideration of class differences, studies show that women, like members of other low-power groups, are less likely than men to put self before others [24] and more likely to endorse interdependent or communal goals [25–27]. Women's greater tendency to seek and mobilize social support, especially during times of stress, is 'one of the most robust gender differences in adult human behavior' [27, p. 418]. Preferences for affiliation over power — characteristics argued to vary by both gender and class — may underlie gender-based and class-based differences in employment choices. Seeking explanations for the persistent gender gap in high status leadership jobs, Gino *et al.* [28] find that women, compared to men, place less importance on self-interested power-related goals. In a parallel exploration of social class and employment preferences, Belmi and Laurin [29**] find that relatively lower class individuals, controlling for gender, are more reluctant than higher class individuals to engage in political behavior to acquire positions of power. Whether gender, class, or some interaction between the two dominates in women's approach to employment remains an open question.

Gender scholars and class scholars often consider additional identity dimensions such as race, ethnicity, and religion [30,31]. While we acknowledge the critical role of intersectionality across multiple dimensions, we focus in this paper on the two-way intersection between gender and class. We first explore interactions between gender and class in shaping the division of labor at home; we then turn to studies revealing how gender and class operate in the workplace. In closing, we suggest ways to extend our understanding of the class-based continuum between individualism and collectivism by incorporating gender into the framework.

Interactions between social class and gender begin at home

The division of unpaid labor within households and across societies is a gendered struggle as well as a class-based struggle. Research on the allocation of unpaid work within households finds that women's bargaining power rises with earnings [32]. As a result, women with higher earnings spend significantly less time on 'second-shift' [33] housework than women with lower earnings [34]. Gupta [35] finds that the difference in total time spent on housework per week between the highest-earning and lowest-earning women is as large as the male-female difference. Reductions in the total number of housework hours for middle and upper class women reflect a shift to paid domestic labor, as women with more resources transfer housework chores to low wage women, reducing the need for intra-household bargaining between more privileged women and their domestic partners [36].

Overall, rising incomes have made it easier for higher earning women to remain employed and nominally responsible for housekeeping while minimizing their own hours of unpaid labor [8,37*]; in contrast, low earning women have fewer options for reducing the time they dedicate to housework.

Women, unsurprisingly, enjoy childcare activities more than housework [38,39*] and women across class and racial backgrounds account for their employment choices as routes taken for the family [8]. Describing career choices in the language of family is consistent with the stereotype of women as selfless and other-oriented, regardless of social class. Yet higher earning women are more likely to report that their family and work identities conflict, while family and work identities are more consistent for lower class women [40]. Middle and upper class cultural schema endorse highly involved parenting, motivating more privileged women to adjust their careers to uphold expectations of intensive mothering [41,42]. In contrast, women earning lower wages are more likely to face social sanctions when they do *not* maintain their employment as they raise their children [43,44**]. Reflecting these social sanctions, restricted household resources, and their lack of power in the workplace, lower class women are more likely to forego highly gendered mothering roles and engage in 'tag team' parenting, with both parents (or other family members) alternating daily between low-paying employment and unpaid care work at home [45*]. In sum, economic resources and social mores make it possible and socially desirable for middle and upper class women to live up to the expectations of intensive mothering without substantially sacrificing their family's financial stability, whereas lower class women with less lucrative and less stable job prospects face social pressure to remain in the workforce while patching together low-cost options for caregiving [46**].

Interactions between social class and gender magnify in workplaces

Within the workplace, occupational and cultural conditions for women also vary by social class. Gender plays a magnified role in women's employment when women are in the minority within an occupation or work environment [47]. Women working in professions where men are the majority face exaggerated gender-based bias [48], and recent evidence suggests this bias may be greater for upper class, relative to middle class, women [49]. The amplification of gender bias may increase upper class women's identification as female while potentially interfering with class-based identification. Female managers and professionals reap career benefits from increases in the presence of women in leadership positions [50,51], but reliance on the minority of leaders who are female may also heighten identification with gender and decrease identification with class.

Low wage-earning women tend to work in occupations with high female representation [52], but they do not reap career-enhancing benefits from the presence of same-sex peers [53]. Mandatory, non-standard work schedules are disproportionately concentrated in low-wage service jobs, imposing family, social, and health-related penalties on lower class women [54]. Lower class jobs push both women and men away from prescribed gender roles as they conform to the restricted options that result from low incomes and low schedule control in their jobs [45*]. Working in low-wage, female-dominated occupations, with the associated economic and work–family struggles, may decrease women’s gender-based identification and increase class-based identification.

Integrating gender and social class

Scholars have begun to consider the role of gender in class-based orientations, but the conclusions vary substantially across studies. Psychology studies using laboratory or online experiments conclude — controlling for gender — that upper class individuals prioritize their own self-interest and self-reliance whereas lower class individuals prioritize social relationships [e.g. 55, 19]. The setting and outcome variables in many of these studies are far removed from the gendered environments women face at work and at home. Studies that do consider employment choices report nonsignificant effects for gender [56,29**]. The inconsistency between these results and a wealth of empirical evidence that women and men make markedly different employment choices in practice [3,4,57*] cries out for further investigation into possible interactions between gender and class.

We identified only two studies that investigate the interplay between gender and class on women’s self-other orientations, both qualitative interview studies. The first, exploring lower and middle class women’s life experiences, finds that middle class women report strong connections to and trust in family and friends, while the social and economic isolation accompanying poverty reduces lower class women’s access to supportive social ties and heightens necessary reliance on the self [58**]. The second finds that professional women who grew up in middle and upper class households tend to assign credit for their career success to their relationships with others, while their peers raised in lower class households are more likely to attribute their success to self-reliance [59**]. Reflecting realities of their respective employment and domestic realms, middle and upper class women may endorse feminine ideals [16] by focusing on their connections with others, while lower class women may be more likely to step outside the traditionally feminine other-orientation as they maneuver among constraints at work and at home.

Conclusion

Because gender reflects the division of labor in public and private spheres, and the division of labor in both spheres differs by class, the dynamic interplay between gender and class has *de facto* influence on women’s employment beliefs and practices. Two possible refinements to the social psychology of class rise from considering gendered environments in homes and workplaces. First, women’s gender-based orientation toward others and preference for affiliation over power [24–26] may mitigate documented class-based differences in self-other orientation. A second alternative points to the potential for self-other orientation to reverse in women’s own understandings of and approach to employment. Middle and upper class women working in male-dominated workplaces, living in households where female employment may be optional, and parenting in communities where intensive parenting is valued, may uphold gendered ideals of women as communal and other-oriented. In contrast, lower class women working in female-dominated occupations, living in households with limited financial resources, and parenting in communities where financial independence is valued, face heightened emphasis on the necessity of looking after one’s own self-interests. The self-other orientations of low-income women may thus defy expectations based on gender as well as those based on class.

To better understand how both women and men construct meanings regarding the self and other in employment contexts, psychology research needs to go beyond categorizations based solely on class and build toward a gendered-class framework. Fully investigating the intersection of gender and class, starting with simple demonstrations of similarities or differences in a two (male/female) by two (higher class/lower class) design, will be revealing. We urge scholars studying class-based differences in beliefs and behaviors to incorporate gendered experiences in homes and workplaces into their research, deepening our understanding of the complex interplay between sources of power and status in society.

Conflict of interest statement

Nothing declared.

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