



CHICAGO JOURNALS

Journal of Consumer Research, Inc.

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Source: *Journal of Consumer Research*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Dec., 1983), pp. 265-280

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2488799>

Accessed: 01/05/2013 12:23

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The Continuing Significance of Social Class to Marketing

RICHARD P. COLEMAN*

Social class is conceptually complicated, philosophically upsetting, and methodologically challenging, yet it continues to offer provocative insights into consumption choices. The latest thinking from sociologists points to a basic continuity in the American status structure: fundamental differences among the classes in self-image, social horizons, and consumption goals continue despite changes in income distribution, the demographics of family composition, and life styles. The question of whether class or income is the better predictor of marketplace behavior should be rephrased: How does class affect use of income?

There are no two ways about it: social class is a difficult idea. Sociologists, in whose discipline the concept emerged, are not of one mind about its value and validity. Consumer researchers, to whose field its use has spread, display confusion about when and how to apply it. The American public is noticeably uncomfortable with the realities about life that it reflects. All who try to measure it have trouble. Studying it rigorously and imaginatively can be monstrously expensive. Yet, all these difficulties notwithstanding, the proposition still holds: social class is worth troubling over for the insights it offers on the marketplace behavior of the nation's consumers. "Hot" and "new" in the 1950s, social class fell from favor and use in the 1970s—it turned "cold" and "old," as it were, hurt by mistakes in employment and by controversy over its merits vis-à-vis income. A fresh view of class is needed, a reassertion of its value in the 1980s—and such is the present purpose.

This paper represents a much-abbreviated, highlighting stab at updating the social class concept and practice. The purpose here is to present some ideas that hopefully will suggest the continuing importance of the social class concept to practitioners and educators in the field. I have drawn heavily on privately financed research, the detailed results of which are not yet in the public domain.

THE SOCIAL CLASSES AT LATEST LOOK

The storyline on the American status structure with which the marketing profession is most familiar was introduced into sociology by W. Lloyd Warner with the first volume

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of his Yankee City series (1941). Six social classes were identified in this work: upper-upper, lower-upper, upper-middle, lower-middle, upper-lower, and lower-lower. This view of the status system crossed over into marketing in the 1950s, and has been forwarded almost intact ever since, although in recent years its currency has been questioned. The social classes that Warner "discovered" offered a new perspective on community life. His were not the economic classes, power clusters, or political interest groups postulated by other social scientists as the meaningful divisions of American society: they were—as defined by Warner—classes of people who were approximately equal in community esteem, and were made up of men and women who regularly socialized among themselves, in both formal and informal ways, and shared behavioral expectations. It was Warner's conviction that these classes represented the most basic ordering of Americans in terms of the self-feelings involved and of shared community respect. Researchers and marketers took note of this concept when Warner and his colleagues at the University of Chicago and Social Research, Inc. began demonstrating that members of different social classes displayed different purchase goals and shopping behaviors. The classes were thus motivational groupings as well as status categories—cause, thereby, not merely correlate, of consumption choice.

To ask how applicable this social class view is in the 1980s, given the decades that have passed since its initial formulation and subsequent adoption by the marketing profession, is, of course, a reasonable question. The critical issues are:

- Do we really have the same classes now as then, and if not, what are they?
- How do the status groupings that characterize today's America affect consumer behavior?
- How do we now tell who ranks where when we study status phenomena?

Marketing literature was singularly lacking in attention to these issues throughout the 1970s—and not without cause, since sociology, from whence social class had sprung, paid similarly little attention for almost two decades.

An Updated Classification

For sociologists, the 1960s and early 1970s were years of cultural ferment and research excitement: the civil rights movement, the feminist struggle for increased equality, the gay liberation drive, and student uprisings in the colleges dominated the sociological agenda. Research in social stratification moved away from contemplative studies of the community hierarchy toward programmatic investigations into all forms of discrimination—between the sexes, the races, ethnic groups, and age cohorts, for example—plus inquiry into any inequities in income, political power, and educational opportunity which might suggest (or “prove”) exploitation of one group in America by another, and/or that life chances varied “unfairly” by social origin. Implicit in all this was a conviction among sociologists that what should matter most to individual Americans is the situations in which they find themselves—not something so ephemeral as a point they might occupy on some social status hierarchy by virtue of personal reputation and that of their network of friends. In this, “situations” meant occupational role, income level, living conditions, and identification with a possibly disadvantaged ethnic/racial group. It is the thrust of this sociological view that Dennis Gilbert and Joseph Kahl have brought into combination with theories from political economy to frame their story in *The American Class Structure: A New Synthesis* (1982). This most recent sociological contribution to status analysis is a dramatic updating of Kahl’s previous, synthesizing study, *The American Class Structure* (1957), in which, reviewing the literature of community studies from the 1950s and before, Kahl treated class in the United States as essentially a matter of style, social networks, and personal prestige reputation. In the new work, a change of mind has taken place—and this is how Gilbert and Kahl put it (1982, p. 354):

We have reversed the direction of emphasis . . . We pay more attention to capitalist ownership and to the occupational division of labor as the defining variables . . . then treat prestige, association, and values as derivative. This difference in viewpoint reflects shifts in the general orientation of the discipline of sociology.

A thumbnail characterization of the class structure which Gilbert and Kahl offer as their new synthesis of political theory and sociological analysis appears in the left column of Exhibit A. In the right column, for comparison, is a similarly abbreviated characterization of the class structure set forth in *Social Standing in America* (Coleman and Rainwater 1978), which can be thought of as “the latest look” at social class taken from a Warnerian social-psychological perspective. This work is the product of a study sponsored in the 1970s by the Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT

and Harvard, in which a cross-section of 900 residents from the Boston and Kansas City metropolitan areas were interviewed intensively on status matters, focusing on their individual perceptions of the social hierarchy and felt participation in it.

What first strikes the eye in Exhibit A is how much these two “latest looks” at the status structure have in common. To a certain extent, however, this is deceiving, since the two views proceed on different classificatory principles. Gilbert and Kahl take a functionalist, “situations” stance, drawn in major part from economic as well as social-political theory. Coleman and Rainwater’s view is reputational and behavioral, borrowing heavily from “man in the street” imagery. Nevertheless, there are two important similarities: they both acknowledge three principal groupings of Americans, and to each they assign almost identical portions of the population.

The roots for a threefold status division are very deep right now. This is the way the middle mass of citizens most readily talk about the hierarchy: there are “people (like us) in the middle,” “people above,” and “people below,” with economic status the major differentiating factor, followed by educational credentials and behavioral standards as secondary influences. And this is the way some of the wisest political analysts are looking at the electorate. In *The Real American Majority*, for example, Scammon and Wattenberg (1970) proposed that on social issues—in people’s ideas about crime and justice, morality and law—the white-collar middle class became allied with the blue-collar working class in the late 1960s to form a great American center wherein is found the “real majority” that swings elections.¹ What we see in these tripartite divisions of American society is truly a dramatic shift away from the bipartite view common to earlier interpretations. Before World War II, social scientists commonly pictured American society as split into opposing halves—a higher-half business class versus a lower-half working class, white-collars on the one side and blue on the other—or, put even more harshly, “have” superiors versus “have-not” inferiors. Now, in both models shown in Exhibit A, that split has diminished to a mere dividing factor within Middle America, while two formerly secondary division lines—one between Warner’s upper-middle and lower-middle, the other between his upper-lower and lower-lower—have risen to primary status (leading, indeed, to class name changes).

The Gilbert–Kahl model is likely to prove of less interest in the long run to marketing people than is the Coleman–Rainwater model, but the rationales for its six

¹The label “Middle Americans” for these people who form the political and social-philosophical center is commonly attributed to columnist Joseph Kraft, who began using it toward the end of 1967 in reference to that part of the public generally given to hardline anti-communism and conservative views on domestic social issues. In Kraft’s initial usage and perception, Middle Americans tended to live more in the heartland than on the coasts, in small towns or in middle-income suburbia. In status, they tended to be either lower white-collar or upper blue-collar; it is this occupation image that sociologists have adopted in applying the phrase to the social status hierarchy.

EXHIBIT A

TWO RECENT VIEWS OF THE AMERICAN STATUS STRUCTURE

The Gilbert–Kahl New Synthesis Class Structure:^a A situations model from political theory and sociological analysis	The Coleman–Rainwater Social Standing Class Hierarchy:^b A reputational, behavioral view in the community study tradition
Upper Americans	Upper Americans
The Capitalist Class (1%)—Their investment decisions shape the national economy; income mostly from assets, earned/inherited; prestige university connections	Upper-Upper (0.3%)—The “capital S society” world of inherited wealth, aristocratic names
Upper Middle Class (14%)—Upper managers, professionals, medium businessmen; college educated; family income ideally runs nearly twice the national average	Lower-Upper (1.2%)—The newer social elite, drawn from current professional, corporate leadership
Middle Americans	Middle Americans
Middle Class (33%)—Middle level white-collar, top level blue-collar; education past high school typical; income somewhat above the national average	Middle Class (32%)—Average pay white-collar workers and their blue-collar friends; live on the “the better side of town,” try to “do the proper things”
Working Class (32%)—Middle level blue-collar; lower level white-collar; income runs slightly below the national average; education is also slightly below	Working Class (38%)—Average pay blue-collar workers; lead “working class life style” whatever the income, school background, and job
Marginal and Lower Americans	Lower Americans
The Working Poor (11–12%)—Below mainstream America in living standard, but above the poverty line; low-paid service workers, operatives; some high school education	“A lower group of people but not the lowest” (9%)—Working, not on welfare; living standard is just above poverty; behavior judged “crude,” “trashy”
The Underclass (8–9%)—Depend primarily on welfare system for sustenance; living standard below poverty line; not regularly employed; lack schooling	“Real Lower-Lower” (7%)—On welfare, visibly poverty-stricken, usually out of work (or have “the dirtiest jobs”); “bums,” “common criminals”

^aAbstracted by Coleman from Gilbert, Dennis and Joseph A. Kahl (1982), “The American Class Structure: A Synthesis,” Chapter 11 in *The American Class Structure: A New Synthesis*, Homewood, IL: The Dorsey Press.

^bThis condensation of the Coleman-Rainwater view is drawn from Chapters 8, 9, and 10 of Coleman, Richard P. and Lee P. Rainwater, with Kent A. McClelland (1978), *Social Standing in America: New Dimensions of Class*, New York: Basic Books.

subdivisions illustrate contemporary academic thinking about class in the United States. Gilbert and Kahl have organized their New Synthesis model around a “series of qualitative economic distinctions and their symbolization,” and explain it this way:

1. The capitalist class, containing just 1 percent of the population, yet “controlling some 51–52 percent of the nation’s wealth,” is distinguished from the upper middle class most noticeably by its *impressive ownership of income-producing assets*.
2. The upper middle class is distinguished from the middle class by *possession of sophisticated educational credentials* which have given its members their entrée to the valued managerial and professional posts they occupy.
3. The middle class is distinguished from the working class by a *combination of job security and freedom from routinization at work*; members of the class, wearing white or blue collars (but mostly the former), frequently “give orders to those below” in the workplace hierarchy, and they “usually feel secure” in their situations.
4. The working class is distinguished from the working poor by having *escaped entrapment in the marginal sector of the labor market*, and because their living standard tends

to place them “in the mainstream” (albeit in “the lower half”).

5. The working poor are distinguished from the underclass because, while not sure of steady employment, they are more often at work than not—and are *not nearly so severely limited in labor force participation*.
6. The underclass is distinguished from all the other classes because in this class alone do people “*receive a majority of their income* either from illegal activities or from government transfers.”

The Coleman-Rainwater approach to construction of a national status hierarchy is very different: it is designed to reflect popular imagery and observation of how people interact with one another—as equals, superiors, or inferiors. Personal and group prestige is at its heart. In this hierarchy, social standing is a multi-factored, richly textured phenomenon. Identification with each class is influenced most heavily by educational credentials and occupation (including income as a measure of work success), but it is also affected to varying degrees by social skills, status aspirations, community participation, family history, cultural level, recreational habits, and physical appearance; ultimately, the proper index to status is a person’s social circle of accep-

tance. No simple statements of qualitative distinction define each stratum with such theoretical precision as in the Gilbert–Kahl model. Nevertheless, three or four words can be used to communicate each stratum's thematic core—successively, from top down in Exhibit A, these might be “old family names,” “accepted new money,” “collegiate credentials expected,” “white-collar associations,” “blue-collar life style,” “definitely below the mainstream,” and “the welfare world.” If these phrases remind readers of the conventional portraits of the status hierarchy, this is because the social ranking Americans apply to one another in reputation and interaction is demonstrating impressive thematic continuity from one generation and era to the next.

Applying the New Classification

What, then, should the marketing world do with these “latest looks” at social class? Drawing from my own research experience with the social class variable during the past two decades, I would suggest two ways this concept might be used in research and strategy planning. One is to divide the consuming public into four main status groups—Upper Americans, Middle Class, Working Class, and Lower Americans. The second suggestion is more a reminder than a new idea—namely, that it must always be kept in mind that a diversity of family situations and a nearly unbelievable range in income totals are contained within each class. The thumbnail sketches and three-word thematic summaries so commonly used to characterize status groups oversimplify in ways that cause people to forget the great variety of life circumstances found in every status group, whether it is the narrow world of upper-upper Upper Americans or the extremely large world of the working class. To illustrate:

A “prototype” household of middle-class Middle American status has as its head a man employed in some lower management office job, earning between \$24,000 and \$29,999 a year (1983 urban-average dollars), whose wife isn't working, so that is all the family income. Almost as likely to be middle class is a divorcee with two years of college as an educational credential, who is trying to support two children on a legal secretary's salary of as little as \$13,500—and who may be best friend and frequent bridge-playing chum to the wife in the first case. Another middle-class home will contain a working couple, both in office jobs, earning in combined total \$42,000 or even \$45,000 a year. A fourth might have as its head the owner of a bowling alley and restaurant whose wife may or may not be helping to run it—or the owner could be a widow, divorcee, or never-married woman; in any case, the living standard projected by house, car(s), and clothes suggests an income of \$60,000 or \$70,000 a year, yet the social status is still middle class because, through lack of mobility aspirations and/or social skills, no Upper American connections and acceptance have been established.

A picture of equally great income and situational differences could be painted for every social level. When marketers and researchers use social class conceptually, they must remember the variations in age of household heads, the broken families, the single people, and the working

couples found in each class, and must realize that all these people are trying to maintain similar social class identities and that in so doing, the motives and goals they bring to the marketplace may be functionally the same, although their means differ greatly.

A single class category of Upper Americans, formed by the bracketing together of upper-uppers with lower-uppers and upper-middles, is recommended on several counts. One is that in a representative sample there would be too few respondents from the two upper-class layers for separate study and statistical treatment unless the total survey size were to exceed 2,000 persons. A second is that diagnosis of social rank—as between these three levels—is not reliably accomplished via the kinds of class-measuring instruments used in the typical mass survey study; the data required for precise placement at these levels are not ordinarily collected, and machine scoring cannot easily be made sensitive to all the nuances involved.² A third reason is that the motives and goals in consumption of most mass-marketed products do not necessarily differ significantly between these three substrata of Upper Americans: only regarding luxury goods and services or specialty items are differences commonly critical.

The two social levels counted as Middle Americans—middle class and working class—are most assuredly worth separate attention from the marketing profession, even though they may not be so sharply differentiated in public image or political views as they were a generation ago, when Warner named them lower-middle and upper-lower, respectively. That they still represent distinct social worlds with different behavioral norms and life styles, despite marked overlap in income, was one of the crucial findings in the Coleman–Rainwater research for *Social Standing in America* (1978). Educational background, class of origin, and a wife's social aspirations often override a husband's white-collar/blue-collar job definition in determining family identification with one class or the other. Consumption priorities and marketplace choices vary accordingly.

Lower Americans are separated into two subclasses in the Gilbert–Kahl as well as in the Coleman–Rainwater model. Both models thus reflect how, in the past 30 years, the public has come to differentiate between people who survive on government transfer payments and those who are poor but who do not usually depend on such assistance. In the 1970s, welfare workers and social scientists began

²Club memberships, specific colleges attended, religious affiliations, and ethnic identifications are all, on occasion, critical evidence of the exact step occupied on the Upper American social ladder—these are among “the nuances involved.” Possibly one out of 15 or 20 families who rank upper-upper in social acceptance may not indeed be “old-money”; a portion of families never achieve upper-upper status even through three generations of wealth; and “nouveau riche” families are not always lower-upper—in a goodly share of instances, they fall somewhere below that, in a category best described as Non-Upper Rich. For further detail on the “nuances” of Upper American rank in metropolitan areas, see Coleman and Neugarten (1971) and Coleman and Rainwater (1978). Still another kind of “nuance” is how to equate the high-status worlds of people living in smaller communities with those in metropolitan areas; this has not yet been solved to anyone's satisfaction.

referring to the former as “the underclass,” while applying “disadvantaged” to the class as a whole (Auletta 1982). The two levels combined account for no more than one-fifth of the adult population and less than one-tenth of the disposable income (8 or 9 percent by the Gilbert–Kahl definition, and only 6 or 7 percent by the Coleman–Rainwater classification).³

CONTINUITY AND CHANGE IN CLASS CONSUMPTION CHOICES

The class concept won entry into the marketing discipline when the proposition that consumer motivations varied consistently by social class was set forth in the 1950s by “the Chicago group” (the *Tribune*’s Pierre Martineau and the Social Research Incorporated’s Lloyd Warner, Burleigh Gardner, Lee Rainwater, and Sidney Levy). Pierre Martineau, director of research at the *Chicago Tribune*, is usually credited with taking the lead in advocating that marketers and advertisers pay attention to the social class variable, by writing *Motivations in Advertising* (1957), speaking at conventions, and submitting journal articles (e.g., Martineau 1958). This effort was abetted by SRI’s issuance of *Women and Department Store Advertising*, edited by Charles McCann (1958). Appearance in 1959 of *Workingman’s Wife*, co-authored by SRI’s Rainwater, Coleman, and Handel, won further interest from the marketing profession for class as a consumption factor, as well as attracting the eye of sociologists through its detailing of blue-collar couples’ life styles.

The research the Chicago group blazed trails with in the very late 1940s showed upper-middle Americans pursuing different goals in home furnishing, appliances, clothing, food, and leisure time use than lower-middles, who in turn displayed consumption objectives (and aesthetic preferences) markedly different from upper-lowers. Certain “catch” phrases encapsulated these inter-class variations: upper-middles were identified with consumption choices reflecting “quality” and “taste,” lower-middles with “re-

spectability” and “conformity,” upper-lowers with “modernity” and “quantity,” and lower-lowers with “instant gratification.” This became the accepted wisdom in marketing’s theory and textbooks, holding sway through the 1960s.

During the 1970s, involvement with social class declined as alternatives emerged—most notably life styles, but also age cohorts, ethnic and racial subgroups, and even geographically related population breakdowns. One source for the distance marketers put between themselves and social class was the rise in the late 1960s of a counterculture that grew out of opposition to the Vietnam war, initially created divisions inside each class, and ultimately affected all classes, bringing new habits of grooming, sexual attitudes, language usage, and musical preference into the mainstream.

Another source for disaffection from class was the differentiation by age cohorts in public behavior that became so extreme in the late 1960s, and remained strong—though in modified ways—through the middle 1970s; generations appeared united across class lines in philosophy, marketplace priorities, and consumption choices. A third source—in some ways a product of the other two—was an increasing visual confusion in the public signs of high status and low status. John Brooks gave partial explanation for this in *Showing Off in America* (1981):

The most effective status seeking style is mockery of status seeking . . . thus the well-to-do wear blue jeans, even worn and threadbare, to proclaim that one is socially secure enough to dress like an underpaid ranch hand.

Brooks’ phrase for this was “parody display.” Confronted with such ambiguous consumption choices and status messages, marketers have asked: If people of different social standing no longer seek to present themselves differently in public, are the classes still distinguished from each other in the self-image motives of their members and in their responses to advertising appeals?

Life-style segmentation was, in its origin, part and parcel with class, which was the very rationale for its importance to marketers—as in Levy (1966; 1971) and Myers and Gutman (1974), who proclaimed life style “the essence of social class.” In the last eight or 10 years, however, life style has become an independent concept, a catch-all of psychographic categories and recreational interest groupings that sometimes brings together people from several classes into one group and at other times divides a single class into subsegments. Some life-style typologies are broad, signifying the basic thrust of a family’s expenditure choices in time and money; others are narrow, referring to a single small piece of the total behavior by dividing Americans into runners, watersports enthusiasts, opera buffs, jazz fans. As such, life-style categories are of direct and obvious concern to merchandisers of products and services. Clearly, life-style research has a place in any proper sociology of consumption; ideally, though, life style should not replace social class, but exist in combination with it.

It is not surprising that social class sometimes seems

³The share of population percentages assigned to the status groups in this paper (see Exhibit A) should be treated as suggestive, not conclusive because these classes should be regarded as conceptual categories—not as precisely defined, measured-and-closed entities. The estimates for the Coleman–Rainwater model were reached after study of several community social-class samplings, contact with a few national cross-section panels, and examination of census data. The findings from these sources were pooled and filtered into a single “best guess” statement. These estimates of social class distribution vary from those printed in various textbooks and in early works on class because (1) the times have changed, (2) the class definitions have changed, and (3) these are projections to the nation rather than findings from one particular community.

Any estimates on income share by class are even more speculative. No documented study is available; the best that can be done is to project from sample data and census reports on distribution of each income level within the national total. Estimates the author would make on income share for other Coleman–Rainwater status groups are: 7–8 percent for the two upper-class levels of Upper Americans, 26–27 percent for the upper-middle sector, 33–34 percent for the middle class, and 26–27 percent for the working class. If this is correct, the two smaller upper-class strata exceed the entire class of Lower Americans in income.

forgotten in the 1980s, since there was a noticeable lack of fresh evidence on its marketplace impact in the literature of the latter 1970s. Indeed, almost as far back as 1960, little was published about class that was truly new; most of what appeared in print merely repeated findings from the 1950s (and some suggested new, contradicting developments). A very large problem is that much of what has been learned about the social class role in consumption choices has remained the private property of research houses and their clients. Another part of the problem is that not all that much research on the class variable was done in those years, both because it is not easy and because new variables emerged and captured contemporary interest. I would like to propose that diminished interest in social class is not so justified as has been assumed in recent years. In illustrating this proposition, I will draw heavily from studies not previously reported, which suggest that social class is continuing to serve as a significant behavioral segmenter in most—though not all—consumer markets, and that it is doing so in surprising and occasionally dramatic ways.⁴

One such study—an inquiry into neighborhood change processes conducted by a research team at the Joint Center for Urban Studies of MIT and Harvard—demonstrated with astonishing clarity how the social-geographic horizons of working-class Americans differ from those of the middle class (Coleman 1977b). A cross-section of 1,000 men and women residing in the metropolitan areas of Houston, Dayton, and Rochester were asked to specify where the physically closest of their relatives then lived and to suggest how this might have influenced their own residential location. The finding was this: whereas more than half (55 percent) of the lower-class and nearly half (45 percent) of the working-class respondents occupied a house or apartment within a linear mile of where a parent, sibling, in-law, aunt, uncle, cousin, grandparent, or grown child resided, less than one-fifth (19 percent) of the middle-class sample and barely one-eighth (12 percent) from Upper American status categories lived in such proximity to any kin whatsoever. In future locational intentions, working-class people usually considered the whereabouts of their extended family, while in the classes above, such concern was almost never reported. Here we see a reflection of the Gilbert and Kahl (1982) proposition that “social classes generate their own subcultures . . . distinctive in life styles, consumption . . . [and] relationships in marriage.”

⁴The research referred to in this and in the next two sections was almost invariably a team effort, involving the author and his associates at either Social Research, Inc., in Chicago or the Joint Center for Urban Studies of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University. Nearly 200 different projects figure in this experience, featuring depth interviews with over 70,000 persons. For all practical purposes, these sample-survey respondents represent a cross-section of the American public—except for a bent toward residents of metropolitan areas rather than small towns and rural counties. The behaviors studied cover the gamut: television response, newspaper readership, attitudes toward cars, neighborhood preferences, cigarette choice, brand favoritism among beers, and sparetime usage, to name but a few. Findings not referenced to the bibliography have been drawn from research documents which remain the private property of clients who chartered the studies.

Working-Class Pride in Family, Place, and Country

That working-class Americans are “family folk,” depending heavily on relatives for economic and emotional support, was a story first forwarded in detail in *Working-man’s Wife* (Rainwater et al. 1959). Further studies throughout the 1960s and 1970s found this class continuing to depend on relatives—relying on kin for tips on job opportunities, soliciting advice from them on purchases, and counting on them in times of “trouble.” This emphasis on family ties is only one sign of how much more limited—and how different—working-class horizons are socially, psychologically, and geographically, compared with those of the middle class. In almost every respect, a parochial view characterizes this blue-collar world.

This locational narrowness has been exhibited in such diverse matters as sports heroes, TV news interest, vacation patterns, and automotive choices. When working-class men are asked which sports figure they most eagerly follow in newspaper sports pages, three-fourths name a player on some local amateur or professional team, whereas less than half of middle-class men and a mere quarter of men from the Upper-American strata are so geographically confined in their preferences. When it comes to television news, much the same principle applies: working-class people like the local segments far more than do middle-class audiences, who show more enthusiasm for national and world coverage. Working-class vacation patterns also illustrate the point: staying in town is not uncommon, and “going away” quite frequently means to a lake or resort area no more than two hours distant; if the trip is a longer one, it’s likely that “relations” are the destination.

A 1976 study of car ownership by social status offers yet another perspective on working-class loyalties—in this instance to their own country, accompanied by great pride in its industrial accomplishments. By the mid-1970s, ownership of an imported car (whether an economy or a luxury model) had penetrated 40 percent of families in upper-status groups and 25 percent in the middle class, but had not reached even one-tenth in the working class. This was three years after the first gas price shock! Yet working-class car owners were still showing a marked preference for the standard sizes and larger cars, rejecting both domestic and foreign compacts; they were choosing used standards over any kind of new compact; and gas-guzzling pickups and recreational vehicles were still in great favor. Thus was the working class remaining the xenophobic heart of resistance to the foreign car invasion and dragging its heels in accepting the idea that America should reduce the size of its automotive equipment; the men of this class were not yet ready to give up this macho symbol of roadway conquest.

It is often speculated that the affluence which came to so much of blue-collar America in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s must surely have produced a change of attitudes and values; the phrase for this hypothesized change is “embourgeoisment.” Yet research has usually demonstrated the contrary: the studies by Berger (1960), Glen and Alston

(1968), Hamilton (1972), and LeMasters (1975) are examples. Their observations on the life styles of economically successful blue-collar workers hold that essentially no value change has occurred. For example, the traditional family structure marked by sharp sex-role division and stereotyping has been maintained: for women, the world continues to center on immediate kin, the extended clan, and perhaps a few longtime friends from neighborhood and growing-up days; for men, a rich peer-group life is continuing at work and in such gathering places as the corner tavern or Moose Lodge, plus outings of masculine camaraderie (fishing trips, stock car races). Indeed, what sociologists and motivation researchers have been finding throughout the past 20 years is that working-class life styles have been almost impervious to change in their basic characteristics—i.e., the limited horizons, the centrality of family and clan, the chauvinistic devotion to nation and neighborhood have been little altered by the automobile, telephone, or television. The modernity—and change—that these people seek is in possessions, not in human relationships or “new ideas.” For them, “keeping up with the times” focuses on the mechanical and recreational, and thus ease of labor and leisure is what they continue to pursue.

The men and women of Lower America are no exception to the rule that diversities and uniformities in values and consumption goals are to be found at each social level. Some members of this world, as has been publicized, are prone to every form of instant gratification known to humankind when the money is available. But others are dedicated to resisting worldly temptations as they struggle toward what some imagine will be a “heavenly reward” for their earthly sacrifices.

Value Variations in Upper America

Through the 1960s and 1970s, the life styles and self-conceptions of people identified with the upper sixth of the nation appear to have changed more than those of people in the classes below. The life-style variations that have emerged exist vertically within Upper America, crossing the substrata and combining people from several status layers into one consumer group with common goals that are differentiated internally mainly by income. There are, of course, continuities from the past: there are still some upper-uppers pursuing a traditionally aristocratic life style, lower-uppers showing off their accession to wealth in flamboyant fashion, and upper-middles leading a country- and service-club existence little different in essence from that described half a century ago by novelists (*Babbitt* by Sinclair Lewis, 1922) and social scientists (the Lynds' *Middletown*, 1929). At the same time, significant numbers of upper-uppers are following less circumscribed patterns of consumption in goods and leisure, while many more lower-uppers and upper-middles are volunteering their time to causes (both left-wing and right) and/or centering their spare time on current cultural and athletic activities. The result is that Upper America is now a vibrant mix of many life styles, which might be labeled post-preppy, sybaritic,

counter-cultural, conventional, intellectual, political, and so on. Such subdivisions are usually of more importance for targeting messages and goods than are the horizontal, status-flavored, class-named strata.

One subdivision of Upper Americans that sociologists and demographers have singled out in recent years is a combination of media influentials (men and women with roles in TV, newspapers, and magazines) and nonprofit professionals (whose expertise is in the employ of government, schools, and foundations). Irving Kristol (1978) has referred to this group as “The New Class,” differentiating them from older-type Upper Americans to the extent that they tend to be “anti-capitalists . . . (who) often take life and energy from an adversary culture whose anti-bourgeois themes infuse our educational system, our media, our arts, and our literature.” Eric Goldman, speaking of approximately the same people in “The Emergence of the Upper Americans” (1980), characterizes them as “essentially a mind-set group” whose basic thrust in ideology and consumption style has been to establish themselves as different from, and above, the Middle American classes—as he puts it, they want to “shake off the tacky in everything.” This Kristol-Goldman type of Upper American probably does not yet account for more than a fourth or a fifth of the total, but its growing presence has produced an indisputable change in the flavor of this status level from that of just two decades ago: liberalism is far more common in social philosophy; the Republican Party is much less firmly entrenched; and “socially conscious consumers” (Webster 1975) are a very noticeable presence.

There are still large reservoirs of subscription to bourgeois values among Upper Americans, and clearly the class as a whole remains that segment of our society in which quality merchandise is most prized, special attention is paid to prestige brands, and the self-image ideal is “spending with good taste” (and being so judged). Self-expression is more prized than in previous generations, and neighborhood—always important—is still so, but with this twist: “interesting neighborhoods,” such as gentrified inner-city areas, are appealing as well as the conventional suburbs, and living in a “charming place” in the country—in “exurbia”—also has cachet (Coleman 1977b). Meanwhile, all the longstanding Upper American dreams of more theatre going when income increases, more purchase of books, investment in art, and more European travel endure (and possibly in greater strength), along with aspiration for “more help in the house,” more “nights out on the town,” more club memberships for golf, swimming, and tennis, and prestige schooling for the children. For most Upper Americans, income is not sufficient to afford all these dreams simultaneously, so priorities are a must—only a lucky few don't have to make sacrifices and choices.

The Middle Class: More Pleasure Mixed into the Propriety

This status level (“lower-middle,” to stick with Warner's terminology) has been recognized from the beginning

as the home of people who most definitely want to “do the right thing” and buy “what’s popular.” They have been very concerned with fashion all along, following—with affordable modifications—the recommendations of “experts” in the print media. When families of this class have increased their earnings to manage it, better living has meant—and still seems to mean—a “nicer home” in a “nicer neighborhood,” “on the better side of town,” with “good schools.” It also means spending more money on “worthwhile experiences” for the children, and aiming them toward a college education; shopping at more expensive stores for clothing with “one of the better brand names”; and constant concern over the appearance of public areas in one’s home—i.e., wherever guests may visit and pass judgment.

Interviews in the 1970s with men and women of this class suggest that a spirit of “individualism” has been entering into their life styles far more than before. This has happened in part because “doing your own thing” was that decade’s fashion, and in part because emulating the self-expressiveness of Upper Americans, in qualified ways, became a conscious goal. This upward gaze of middle-class people continues to distinguish them from the working class; they are among the big supporters of dinner theater and all the other cultural trickle-down from Upper America. The ongoing middle-class struggle to uplift oneself has led significant numbers to enroll sporadically at local universities and community colleges. Imaged as a mental challenge and storehouse for knowledge, the home computer will do particularly well here when it reaches mass-market pricing.

There is not so much “stuffiness” in middle-class self-presentation these days as there was in the 1950s. Public dress codes have relaxed, and these people have taken their cue from Upper Americans. They eat out more, talk more comfortably about having cocktails, and enjoy trips to Las Vegas (if it’s no more than a two- or three-hour flight away). “Doing things for the children” commonly includes enjoyment for the parents too, as in winter ski trips for the whole family in which the children acquire a socially valued skill and the parents maintain one. Indeed, such themes as physical activity form a new image of middle-class life in which possessions—pride has yielded a bit to activities—pleasure. Life seems more fun, not quite so serious at this status level in the 1980s. Deferred gratification may still be an ideal, but it is not so often practiced; self-denial and self-indulgence are in closer balance.

As in the world of Upper America, so too in the Middle American middle class, varieties of life style are found. Some reflect a split within the class between traditional outlooks and the more liberated, contemporary view; others are related to which kinds of possessions are most treasured, which pleasures most eagerly pursued.

CLASS VS. INCOME

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of studies reported conflicting conclusions as to whether social class

or income better predicts buyer behavior. The end result was that the role assigned to social class by marketing professionals went into decline. Little further attention was paid to social class versus income until 1981, when two noteworthy reexaminations of the question were published almost simultaneously by Schaninger (1981) and Dominquez and Page (1981). These two articles constitute so thorough and thoughtful a review of the several technical and substantive issues involved that yet another examination here would serve no useful purpose.⁵

Among the conclusions reached by Dominquez and Page were (1) that “new stratification scales” should be developed to accord with the new status realities of the 1980s, and (2) that future research should look closely into how the value and communication systems associated with each class underlie consumption patterns. Schaninger proposed the “tentative generalizations” that:

1. “Social class is superior . . . for areas of consumer behavior that do not involve high dollar expenditures, but do reflect underlying life-style value”;
2. “Income is superior for products which require substantial expenditure . . . and reflect ability to pay” yet are not perceived to be class-linked status symbols; and
3. Both must be used in combination for “product classes that are highly visible, serve as symbols of . . . status within class, and require either moderate or substantial expenditure.”

Schaninger thus pronounced himself in agreement with Wind (1978), whose contention was that the entire controversy as to whether income or social class is the more basic segmentation variable is spurious, since it is better to accept both as valuable, then determine product by product what contribution each makes. Reynolds (1965) took the same view when he argued that the forecasting powers of class and income should be expected to differ from one market arena to the next, so that neither should be ignored or assigned automatic dominance.

There are many reasons for considering both class and income when trying to understand the consumer, but the truly critical one is this: *class and income are not really very well correlated*. They index two quite different aspects of life circumstance, although it is common for Americans to assume that class is really a product of income. Had Warner (1941) found class and income to be as closely related as he anticipated when he began his Yankee City studies in the early 1930s (correlated, for example, at or above 0.75), he would have stayed with his original hypothesis that income standing is the crucial organizing principle in American society. Instead, his findings indicated how little of social position in a community is explained by

⁵Examples of class versus income studies reviewed by Schaninger (1981) and Dominquez and Page (1981) include: Coleman (1960), Carman (1965), Rich and Jain (1968), Wasson (1969), Matthews and Slocum (1969), Peters (1970), Slocum and Matthews (1970), Myers, Stanton, and Haug (1971), Myers and Mount (1973), Hisrich and Peters (1974), and Prasad (1975).

income variation, so he postulated class as the critical organizing factor. In the United States of the 1980s, each social class contains such a mix of family types that the class-income correlation may well have dipped to little more than 0.40—and perhaps lower.⁶

It must not be forgotten that social status derives, in its root, more from occupational differentiation than from income. This is an ancient observation, dating to pre-Christian societies. There has never been a perfect correlation between the social honor paid different occupations and the income derived from their pursuit. Twentieth century America may illustrate this proposition to an extreme degree: blue-collar workers can outearn both white-collar workers and salaried professionals, yet they still do not rise above either in social status. To put this in the vernacular, the blue-collar workers “have more money than class,” the white-collar workers “more class than money.”

A second explanation for the unextraordinary correlation between class and income is that income varies markedly according to its earner's location in the age cycle. Young people—who are first apprentices, then in the junior stages of their careers—typically receive paychecks far below average for members of the social class with which they are identified by virtue of family origin, education, and occupational type. Class “norms” in earning power—i.e., what is publicly assumed to be average earnings for members of the class—are typically realized after age 35. Beyond 55, earnings tend to either exceed the norm or fall below it, depending on whether the benefits of seniority or the hazards of ill health and/or occupational obsolescence prevail.

A third source of income overlap between the social classes is family variation in the number and sex of earners. This can almost certainly be considered a major factor in how much reduction has occurred in the class-income correlation over the last 20 years. As more families at all social levels have experienced divorce, leading to households headed by a female earner, household incomes far below class averages have been added to the picture in larger portions. Meanwhile, as more wives have become part- or full-time members of the nation's paid workforce, household incomes far above the class average have also been added to each status group's continuum in far greater proportions than before. The result of these and other changes—such as more households in all classes headed by young singles, retirees, and the elderly widowed—is that the picture of income distribution in each class resembles an elongated oblong more than a compact, bell-shaped curve.

⁶In the mid-1950s study of Kansas City by the University of Chicago's Committee on Human Development, a 0.55 correlation between social class and income was produced in a sample limited to households with heads in the middle-age range of 40–69 years (Coleman and Neugarten 1971). With households of all types drawn from the total age range, the correlation would not have been higher than 0.45, which leads to the assumption that today's is even lower. Studies where social class is indexed by a relatively uncomplicated socio-economic status scale may show higher correlations with income, but depth studies of class versus income will consistently report lower ones.

Clarification of Income and Class

In considering family variation in number and sex of earners as a contributor to the reduced class-income correlation, two points must be kept in mind:

1. Total household income is an illusory index to family living standards—much less to social class—wherever it includes money earned by household members that is not pooled toward the common good.
2. Increases in family income resulting from more of the individual members becoming earners almost never produce a change in the family's social class.

What, then, is the best income figure—household total, individual earnings, or some factored partial product—for use in predicting the marketplace behavior of the individual members (and combinations thereof) in a multi-income household? An inquiry into this problem, using detailed data from the University of Michigan Survey Research Center's Panel Study of Income Dynamics, produced more questions than answers (Coleman 1977a). For example, it was found that when young adults work full time and live at home, their contribution to parental well-being ranges from 10¢ on the dollar to 50 or 60¢. Wives' earnings contribute more than children's to the household's public projection of well-being, but vary markedly in whether the money goes toward life-style extras or living-standard basics. Clearly, the most widely used measure—total income earned by all a household's members, as reported by the survey respondent (inaccuracies in which abound!)—has its drawbacks; when income has turned out to be a poor predictor of consumer choice behavior, this definitional approach may well have been part of the fault.

Also, why does an increase in household income rarely result in class change when members of a family beyond its head join the workforce? A major reason is that these other earners usually work at jobs of no higher status than the primary earner's; more commonly, their jobs are of less stature. This applies especially when adult children go to work; usually, it also applies when a wife finds employment. Take a lower-class, trash-collecting husband, for example: when his wife enters the labor force, she is apt to become some sort of cleanup helper. Although the couple's income is thereby increased, community judgments of its social class are likely to remain the same, especially if no change is made in friendship circles and the major observable alteration in living standard is ownership of more “junk” cars and consumption of more beer. By the same token, when the wife of a factory worker husband goes to work in a factory too, the couple's total income may rise far beyond the middle-class average, but the pair will remain working class in social identity because middle-class America does not readily accept women with blue-collar employment—and such a woman probably isn't even trying for it.

The truth is that the classes we are talking about have mostly to do with social networks and peer judgments of “people quality,” and have little to do with income levels

except as these latter can be construed as proof of that quality. Thus it is that social class changes ordinarily come to a family only when the major earner—who may well be a woman—manages a shift in the public's definition of relationship to the occupational hierarchy. This change in occupational definition is accompanied by a change in friendship circles, and new consumption goals replace the old; hence the family value system and its public behavior are deemed appropriate for acceptance by a higher status circle.

That changes in economic status do not more often lead to changes in social class is yet one more explanation for the very modest class-income correlation. The sum impact of all these contemporary sources for difference between income status and social class is a lower correlation between the two than was the case in the 1950s, when social scientists first called the marketing world's attention to the class concept. As an allied development we have this: substantially greater percentages of each class's families are either "overprivileged" or "underprivileged"—and thus not "average"—than was the case two decades ago, when this way of parceling off the income continuum was first proposed (Coleman 1960). All these changes mean that it is still useful to look at social classes as divided into three economic subclasses—perhaps even more so.

The definitions offered for these economic substrata are as before. The "overprivileged" families in each social class are those with money left over (after the class-standard package of shelter, clothing, and transportation has been acquired) for the forms of "better living" that families of their class prefer; their incomes are usually 25 or 30 percent above the class median. The "class-average" families are those in the middle of the class income range who can therefore afford the kind of house, car, apparel, food, furniture, and appliances expected at their status level. The "underprivileged" are those who, while not truly poor (except, of course, in the lower class), can consider themselves in difficult straits, given what is expected from people of their status in the way of social participation and projected standard of living. Many of their consumer choices amount to scrimping, saving, and sacrificing in order to make proper appearances where these really count; their incomes fall at least 15 percent or more below the class midpoint.

Taking these definitions as guides, we might think of income minimums for "class-average" status in 1983 dollars this way: \$100,000 (or a little more) if upper-upper or lower-upper, and \$45,000 for upper-middles in the Upper American world; \$24,000 for middle-class Middle Americans and \$16,000 for working class; and \$9,900 for Lower Americans, that figure being the most recent government-declared "poverty line." Just below those minimums is where the "underprivileged" state begins, class by class. The opposite "overprivileged" condition starts at \$15–16,000 for Lower Americans, \$24–26,000 in the working class, \$36–39,000 in the middle class, \$70–80,000 in upper-middle, and \$200–250,000 for the upper class.

These figures are of course no more than approximations, the loosest of guidelines for looking at the significance of income in a social class context. They relate to urban areas where the cost of living is presently at average for the nation, and most properly only to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' hypothetical four-person family (father 43 years of age, mother 38, and two children, ages 13 and 8). For families of other situation and size, appropriately varied standards should be applied when examining buyer behavior for impact of income status within class. Indeed, this is more a conceptual tool than a tidy research device.

Research Support

The continuing vitality of this income-in-class concept has been affirmed during the last 10 years by a series of depth studies of life-style and consumption choices in which special emphasis has been given to families of above-average income. Observe, for illustration, how different is the marketplace behavior among Upper American families with annual incomes of \$30,000 to \$75,000 (in 1983 dollars) from that of families with the same income who would be judged to be Middle Americans (either middle class or working class). The former are, of course, either "class-average" or "underprivileged" within their Upper American status world, while the latter are "overprivileged" in Middle America. The "overprivileged" Middle Americans can be distinguished from the "underprivileged" Upper Americans by the much greater frequency with which they own motorboats, RVs, campers, pickup trucks for sport as well as work, tractor lawnmowers, snowblowers, remote control TV, swimming pools in the backyard and/or a lake-side home, late-model sports cars for their teen-aged collegiate offspring, and expensive, largish cars for themselves. Upper Americans of the same income spend relatively greater amounts—of both time and money—on private club memberships, special educational experiences for their children, high-culture objects and events, and civic affairs participation ("causes," boards, and so on); their houses are not particularly more expensive than Middle Americans's but are much more "properly" addressed, and their cars are not so often domestic and pretentious as small and/or foreign. Equally noteworthy differences in consumption choices appear up and down the scale when people of the same income but of different social class are compared.

This illustration of how class and income are continuing to interact points to a resolution for the class-income debate. The question of whether class or income is the better segmentation variable should be put aside. What researchers should ask instead is how social class affects use of income in the marketplace—and also when, why, and to what extent.

Income is the obvious first-order segmenting variable whenever expenditure decisions are studied; income and outflow both involve dollars, so a correlation of sorts is inevitable. It makes perfect sense to assume that in a major number of marketplace transactions, income will govern

how much can be spent (and hence will be). Yet we always have to use other variables—age, perhaps, or sex, family composition, life style, self-image, and social class—to understand why income has sometimes operated quite well as a predictor and other times rather poorly. As often as not, the reason will be found in social class, which may be acting all by itself or possibly in concert with one or more other social-psychological or demographic variables.

Researchers can expect to find every conceivable mix of class impact on income use, from almost nil in some product or service areas to nearly conclusive in others. An instance of the latter might be spending money to watch stock car races: very few people outside the working class or lower class are interested, so this is almost entirely a matter of class-related entertainment preferences, rather than cost considerations. The purchase of squash racquets is equally a matter of class experience, and only coincidentally an income consideration, since very few men outside Upper America play squash. Extremes like this are not, however, the rule.

Far more common are market areas in which the effect of class follows the privilege-level model. The car market used to be an example (see Coleman 1960), with choice behavior best explained when each class was broken down into its "privilege" segments. By the early 1970s, however, the whole business of car buying had become so heavily infused with life-style goals and self-imagery expressions that income position within social class was not a ready predictor. By that point in auto market history, class was having its maximum impact (income almost totally aside) in determining who was most likely to buy foreign and who domestic, or who would opt for intermediates (and/or compacts) versus who would stick with standards.

It is still necessary to look at social class and income simultaneously when trying to understand how people house themselves and where they choose to do so in a metropolitan area. Class identification and status aspirations govern neighborhood choice (Coleman 1977b), then pocketbook power dictates which house or apartment. This has not changed through the years. Yet Schaninger (1981) has suggested change in the income-class relationships in kitchen appliance choice. Indeed, change may be more the rule than constancy; nothing can be taken for granted.

Finally, there are product areas in which the impact of social class is at best unclear and slight, although probably not absent entirely. Examples might be cigarettes and perhaps beer. Among cigarette smokers and beer drinkers, there is usually a heavy investment in feelings of maturity and toughness, perhaps a bit of rebellion against prudish morality, a willingness (even eagerness) to identify with all of "sinning" humanity. Social status statements are not so commonly the goal as are psycho-sexual ones. Brand choices may still correlate with class, but at a low level, so they are hardly predictable.

Too much may have been expected of social class by too many, so that disappointment has been the result. Were class treated as proposed here, this should not happen.

PROPOSITIONS FOR THE MEASUREMENT OF CLASS

Stratification of consumer study populations by social class is not a simple process because so many variables are involved. Yet it is not hopelessly difficult, if less than perfect placement of cases is acceptable. It is proper for standards to vary, depending on the research purposes; thus new, alternative approaches are needed that are of varying complexity.

Dominquez and Page (1981) concluded their survey of the stratification literature with a cataloguing of deficiencies in status-measuring instruments used in the 1960s and 1970s. A major problem, they found, is that the two most widely employed instruments are badly showing their age: one, the Index of Status Characteristics, dates back to the 1940s (Warner, Meeker, and Eells 1949b) and the other, the Index of Social Position, to the 1950s (Hollingshead and Redlich 1958). Most critical in this regard is that scaling of the variables—occupation, education, neighborhood, and/or house type—seems "out of date . . . [predicated on] a society that no longer exists." Alternate scaling devices are faulted as typically "oversimplified," not truly indexing social class (as defined here); more properly, they should be designated measures of "socio-economic status."

One more problem is that all class measuring sticks do a poor job of indexing the status of households that fall outside the marital-couple mold (i.e., male head in the middle of his career with wife who is a homemaker/mother). This flaw becomes more serious with the yearly rise in two-income families, female-headed households, independent young singles, retired people, and so on, all of whom are easily misidentified for social class when different score criteria are not applied to their particular circumstances.

In the earliest studies of social class, status identification was determined by extensive interviewing in a community about reputations of individuals and groups; this was coupled with elaborate charting of formal and informal interaction patterns, and the combination of these procedures was labeled Evaluated Participation (Warner et al. 1949b). Such an approach is possible only in small communities and with virtually unlimited funds. Yet its end product—personal placement according to identification with ranked status networks—is the goal researchers seek when looking at the impact social class has on choice behaviors in the consumption arena. This is what must be aimed for in less time-consuming, less expensive ways.

In an "ideal world" (just one step down in methodological complexity from Evaluated Participation), survey respondents would be interviewed for about 90 minutes, with all manner of socio-economic facts elicited—i.e., a full accounting of present life style, plus biographical data back to childhood. The interviewer would then attach two or three pages of detailed observation on the respondent's speech, appearance, and manner (and likewise for the

spouse and other family members), household furnishings and upkeep, the home's exterior appearance, and characteristics of the neighborhood. This kind of data base would provide the researcher with almost as much evidence for placement of sample members as Americans at large use in their daily lives when they rate one another and decide whom to consider status equals, inferiors, and superiors. In a real world of limited budgets, researchers must settle for less, of course: how much less—and what kind of “less”—will vary depending on their funds and objectives.

It would also be ideal if the social class placements for a researched population could be rendered by an “expert,” a sensitive interpreter of the data who would subjectively analyze how all the bits and pieces of fact and impression about a given individual go together to produce a ranking in the status hierarchy. But there are only a few such experts around, so less talented placers or mechanized devices must suffice in almost all research situations. Whether some level of human skill must be brought to bear or whether a machine-graded scale is sufficient depends on whether social class is at center focus in the research or merely one of many variables contemplated.

I would now like to offer four propositions about what combinations (and kinds) of skill and scale should be called on by researchers in different circumstances, with this caveat: these propositions are guidelines, not final solutions. They are first steps, as it were, toward updated, improved techniques in the research indexing of the social class variable.

Proposition 1: For the consumer researcher who is seeking nothing more than suggestive evidence of class's impact in a product area, it is recommended that a simplified, proxy measure be accepted.

An example of such a measure, the Computerized Status Index (CSI), is presented in Exhibit B, which shows the latest version in a series of such computerized indexes originally developed for Social Research, Inc. in the late 1960s. Researchers are encouraged to treat this version as illustrative and to experiment with similar measuring sticks more appropriate for the field approach they employ and data they will generate.

Exhibit B is the page in an interview protocol given over to field collection of data, ratings, and coding for a CSI. In this particular version, occupation is weighted double when computing the total score; other versions include an occupation scaling specifically for employed women, to be used whether they are the spouse or the household head, and a somewhat different weighting scheme. When a respondent is not married, education is given a double weight along with occupation. Status interpretation of the total score for conventional marital-couple cases, with male household head between 35 and 64 years of age, would run this way:

Upper American	37 to 53
Middle Class	24 to 36
Working Class	13 to 23
Lower American	4 to 12

Variations in score interpretation sometimes must be employed if, for instance, income levels where the study is conducted are markedly below or above the national average, or if the interviewers appear to have been unusually generous in their ratings of occupation and/or neighborhood status. When sensitivity by age, marital status, and household situation is introduced into the score-interpretation programming, the minimum totals required for any given social class assignment are dropped by one, two, or three points, depending on the circumstances.⁷

Proposition 2. When the research objective is an in-depth study of the relationship between social class and consumption choice, assignment of sample cases to class groupings should be rendered in qualitative fashion by “expert” judgment.

This should be the case whether the data available for the judgment cover only three or four variables or extend to an extensive battery of 20 or 30 class-related behavioral and demographic factors. Such qualitative and “expert” judgment is required for proper balancing of the variables and weighing of their differential status impact, depending on the ages involved, the household composition, and locale. This in-depth approach to classification is recommended to all research institutes and advertising agencies that have established consumer panels for regular collection of consumption data and intensive analysis of marketplace choice correlates.

Proposition 3. Research in social class will benefit from the development of fresh scales for measurement of the component variables.

These scales should be constructed so that, when combined in a multi-factored index, they produce a visual profile of status assets and liabilities in each case under study; to do this, scores on each variable should relate to social class in the same way. How this principle works is exemplified by the eight scales that form the Index of Urban

⁷Total scores on the illustrated Computerized Status Index (CSI) produce a “correct” social class placement for at least 75 percent of cases in a sampled population, when no special coding or score interpretation is applied for households at the age extremes or to unmarried respondents. When instructions for these special circumstances are programmed in, the class identification accuracy rises toward 90 percent.

The reader may ask, with complete justification: “What is the standard of proof for a ‘correct’ status placement?” The answer is this: if all data on a person's social network were available, and intensive community study had placed that network in the status hierarchy—and if, in addition, extensive reputational data had been assembled on the person to be classified—a “correct” status call could be made by the research team involved. Such occurred in the early days of class research, but it will never happen again. Anything we can today call a “correct placement” is one based on 30 or 40 pieces of evidence, rather than only three, four, or five. The basis for the assertion above that the CSI gives a “correct placement” just 75 (or maybe 80) percent of the time is comparisons made between placements rendered by a three- or four-factor CSI and those rendered by an “expert” using 10 times that many strands of status-relevant data on the same cases. Again, the reader must be cautioned: social class is a conceptual tool and, lacking precise definition, is ultimately not susceptible to perfect measurement, nor to absolute standards of validity in case placements.

EXHIBIT B

EXAMPLE OF A COMPUTERIZED STATUS INDEX (CSI)

Interviewer circles code numbers (for the computer) which in his/her judgment best fit the respondent and family. Interviewer asks for detail on occupation, then makes rating. Interviewer often asks the respondent to describe neighborhood in own words. Interviewer asks respondent to specify income—a card is presented the respondent showing the eight brackets—and records R's response. If interviewer feels this is over-statement or under, a "better-judgment" estimate should be given, along with explanation.

EDUCATION:	Respondent	Respondent's Spouse
Grammar school (8 yrs or less)	-1 R's age: _____	-1 Spouse's age: _____
Some high school (9 to 11 yrs)	-2	-2
Graduated high school (12 yrs)	-3	-3
Some post high school (business, nursing, technical, 1 yr college)	-4	-4
Two, three years of college—possibly Associate of Arts degree	-5	-5
Graduated four-year college (B.A./B.S.)	-7	-7
Master's or five-year professional degree	-8	-8
Ph.D. or six/seven-year professional degree	-9	-9

OCCUPATION PRESTIGE LEVEL OF HOUSEHOLD HEAD: Interviewer's judgment of how head-of-household rates in occupational status.

(Respondent's description—ask for previous occupation if retired, or if R. is widow, ask husband's: _____)

Chronically unemployed—"day" laborers, unskilled; on welfare	-0
Steadily employed but in marginal semi-skilled jobs; custodians, minimum-pay factory help, service workers (gas attendants, etc.)	-1
Average-skill assembly-line workers, bus and truck drivers, police and firefighters, route deliverymen, carpenters, brickmasons	-2
Skilled craftsmen (electricians), small contractors, factory foremen, low-pay salesclerks, office workers, postal employees	-3
Owners of very small firms (2-4 employees), technicians, salespeople, office workers, civil servants with average level salaries	-4
Middle management, teachers, social workers, lesser professionals	-5
Lesser corporate officials, owners of middle-sized businesses (10-20 employees), moderate-success professionals (dentists, engineers, etc.)	-7
Top corporate executives, "big successes" in the professional world (leading doctors and lawyers), "rich" business owners	-9

AREA OF RESIDENCE: Interviewer's impressions of the immediate neighborhood in terms of its reputation in the eyes of the community.

Slum area: people on relief, common laborers	-1
Strictly working class: not slummy but some very poor housing	-2
Predominantly blue-collar with some office workers	-3
Predominantly white-collar with some well-paid blue-collar	-4
Better white-collar area: not many executives, but hardly any blue-collar either	-5
Excellent area: professionals and well-paid managers	-7
"Wealthy" or "society"-type neighborhood	-9

TOTAL FAMILY INCOME PER YEAR:

				TOTAL SCORE _____
Under \$5,000	-1	\$20,000 to \$24,999	-5	
\$5,000 to \$9,999	-2	\$25,000 to \$34,999	-6	
\$10,000 to \$14,999	-3	\$35,000 to \$49,999	-7	Estimated
\$15,000 to \$19,999	-4	\$50,000 and over	-8	Status _____

(Interviewer's estimate: _____ and explanation: _____)

R's MARITAL STATUS: Married ___ Divorced/Separated ___ Widowed ___ Single ___ (CODE: ___)

Status (Coleman and Neugarten 1971; Coleman 1973). Another promising approach for the updated scaling of variables lies in application of magnitude-estimation techniques as reported in Coleman and Rainwater (1978).

Proposition 4. *Status measurement in the future must do a better job of accounting for the woman's contribution to family social standing than the typical class index has done in the past.*

Shimp and Yokum (1981) called attention to this deficiency, stating that "measurement of social class has always . . . [wrongfully] assumed the husband's (characteristics) are the sole determinants of a household's class standing." They had a name for this defect—"the husband only fallacy"—and they are only too right! The role of women in the class equation has never been properly measured. This indictment applies whether the woman is the household head, married and an earner along with the husband, or a nonearning wife who is nonetheless a potent contributor to family social status through her choice of friends, clubs, church, and neighborhood. That women's differing educational credentials, cultural interests, and ancestry frequently produce a one-class difference in the status of families where husbands are equal in occupational status, income, and education has been detailed in Coleman and Neugarten (1971).

What is needed in light of "the husband only fallacy"? For one, the neighborhood variable should be included as often as possible in status-measuring devices. Neighborhood is almost always a measure—albeit indirect—of a woman's social horizons and aspirations. A scale for female educational background is even more necessary, and should be weighted as heavily in any family total score as the male scale for schooling. Ideally, it should measure the "which school" factor of collegiate education, what personal associations were formed while there (such as membership in a sorority), and number of years completed, since these associational factors have historically been the most socially consequential part of a woman's post-high-school educational credentials (Coleman and Neugarten 1971; Coleman 1973). A scale for women's occupations, as distinguished from men's, is also recommended because different principles of status consequence have applied in the past—and probably still do. Whatever the job, the work setting (factory vs. office or school, high-status retail store vs. low) and the clientele served can be critical indicators of a woman's class identification. Introducing scales such as these into status-measuring instruments would greatly increase their relevance for households headed by women; it would also improve their predictive accuracy for marital couples, especially those at the age extremes.

CONCLUSION

The four propositions just described are offered in the hope they will lead to the regeneration of social class as a research variable. They are a start only, and do not begin

to solve new problems that will emerge.⁸ There is much to be done if social class is to be reinvigorated as a variable in the analysis of marketplace behavior. Class placement of research samples should be attempted as often as possible, employing modernized status measuring sticks. How Americans of each status level vary from one another in self-concept, values, and consumption goals must be examined repeatedly, and the findings must be applied to specific product and service areas.

As we survey the past 30 years, what is perhaps most astonishing is how much continuity there has been in class value systems, which have remained relatively intact through economic cycles of inflation and recession and through pronounced changes in apparel customs, car purchases, and food habits. The many life-style variations that have appeared within each class—and that have crossed class lines to unite members of different status groups in common spare-time pursuits—have tended to obscure the fundamental continuity of the class structure; so too have changing educational standards and occupational shifts in income reward, not to mention declining family stability.

The social class concept is not so much outdated as it is underutilized. Sophisticated application has not been easy, and never will be. Marketers, however, must not let this difficulty turn them away from keeping constant track of how (and whether) social class is continuing to be significant—as shaper of consumer goals, as influence on marketplace choice.

[Received August 1982. Revised August 1983.]

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⁸One problem not touched upon here is the class identification of farm families and the measurement thereof. The relationship of rural Americans and residents of the smaller country towns to the urban status structure has remained unexamined since World War II as Americans have flocked to the metropolitan areas and their burgeoning suburbs. If, as witnessed in the 1970s, our population continues its contrary move away from metropolis and out to exurbia, small towns, and smaller cities, this nonmetropolitan sector will become more important in the future. In any event, we should extend our social class investigations and concepts to include those millions of Americans who live outside the Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas (SMSAs).

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