

## Social Class Privilege – Beyond Ethnicity, Gender, and Religion

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There are excellent materials and checklists for White Privilege, Male Privilege and even for Christian Privilege, but none for social class privilege. Social class in the US is a fact of life. Social class often described as a function of income, occupational prestige and education. Social class is better conceptualized as a collection of subcultures arranged in a hierarchy of prestige. People who have more prestige occupations are generally paid more than people in lower prestige occupations. People who went to prestige schools and colleges generally get more prestige positions or are engaged in more prestige occupations than people who went to non-prestige schools.

The US is a class-based society. If we divide the US into two groups on either side of the average, then we have the lower social classes and the upper social classes. Most people are middle class. The income, occupation and prestige range of the middle class is huge but the difference between the lower middle class and the upper middle class is quite real. While it is better to be rich than poor in the US, even the lower social classes have special prestige and privilege.

Prestige is a function of what the public collectively believes. Prestige jobs are prestige because people collectively believe they are prestige. Prestige is a social co-construction. If privilege goes along with prestige, then privilege is a social co-construction. Privilege is both given and received.

In the US we have a dual attitude toward the upper classes. While deference is given to the upper classes, and advertisements, marketing, and education portray the upper classes as desirable, the working classes, the lower social classes, those who engage in physical labor, are portrayed as noble. The American Working Man and Woman are the icons of our country.

From time to time fashion reflects a lower social class emphasis with work boots and flannel shirts becoming trendy. Music of the lower social classes is considered genuine folk art and teens continually listen to anti-intellectual anti-prestige lyrics. Slang terms for the “Suits” reflect and reify our collective bias against the upper classes. There is something jarring about a Physician listening to Rap. There is something odd about a working class musician star who has become wealthy.

Below are two checklists outlining the privileges of the lower social classes and the upper social classes. As you read these please remember that these reflect a common set of beliefs about prestige and privilege, that we all co-create these privileges when we give or receive any of these. Some of the privileges are the same for the lower and upper classes, but as you read them, you realize that they play out differently, sometimes positively, sometimes negatively.

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**Checklist for the Privileges of the Upper Social Classes**

1. I don't need to worry about learning the social customs of others.
2. The better people are in my social class.
3. It is likely that my career and financial success will be attributed to my hard work.
4. People appear to pay attention to my social class.
5. When I am shopping, people usually call me "Sir" or "Ma'am".
6. When making a purchase with a check or credit card, my appearance doesn't create problems.
7. When I, or my children, are taught about history, people from my social class are represented in the books.
8. I can easily speak with my attorney or physician.
9. There are neighborhoods I can move to where I feel "at home".
10. There are places where I can be among those exclusively from my social class.
11. I can deny Social Class Privilege by asserting that all social classes are essentially the same.
12. Experts appearing on mass media are from my social class.
13. There are stores that market especially to people from my social class.
14. I can protect myself (and my children) from people who may not like me (or them) based on my social class.
15. Law enforcement officials will likely assume I am a non-threatening person once they see me and hear me.
16. Disclosure of my work and education may actually help law enforcement officials perceive me as being "in the right" or "unbiased."
17. I can easily speak to my child's college professors.
18. My citizenship and immigration status will likely not be questioned, and my background will likely not be investigated, because of my social class.
19. I can be sure that my social class will be an advantage when seeking medical or legal help.
20. If I wish to give my children a private education, I have a variety of options.
21. I can find colleges that have many people from my social class as students and that welcome me or my child.
22. If I apply for a prestige job competing with people of a lower class, my social class will be to my advantage.
23. The decision to hire me will be related to where I went to school.
24. When I watch TV or read the papers I can see people of my own class represented well.
25. The "Newsmakers" are like me.
26. I deserve my status because of my accomplishments.

## **Checklist for the Privileges of the Lower Social Classes**

1. There are places where I can be among people exclusively from my social class.
2. The really good people are in my social class.
3. I don't need to learn to speak properly.
4. Mass media represents my social class positively.
5. There are many TV shows about people and families like mine.
6. There are stores that market especially to people from my social class.
7. I am welcome to say or write negative things about the social classes above mine without any fear of being criticized.
8. I can easily speak with my child's schoolteachers and school counselors because we share a common background.
9. I can usually intimidate someone from the upper classes.
10. I can find colleges that have many people from my social class as students and that welcome me or my child.
11. There are neighborhoods I can move to where I feel "at home".
12. There are many movies about people from my social class.
13. People appear to pay attention to my social class.
14. My social class will be an advantage in applying for certain kinds of jobs, even if I compete with people from a higher social class.
15. The decision to hire me will be related to where I went to school.
16. "Human interest stories" are generally about people like me.
17. Inspirational stories of individual success are always about people like me.
18. I don't have to worry about having a career.
19. I don't have to worry about being attacked when I am walking.
20. Local news reporters and anchors are people like me.