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Socioeconomic Stereotypes among Undergraduate College Students¹

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Summary.—Classism, i.e., socioeconomic stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination, that college students directed towards their peers was examined. A sample of 53 undergraduate students (36 women and 17 men), ages 18 to 22 years ($M = 19.0$, $SD = 1.2$), were recruited from psychology courses. Utilizing a computer administered questionnaire, participants were randomly assigned to rate a fictitious student whose family income was specified as among the lowest or highest at the college. Upper Income targets were rated as more sociable, judgmental, attractive, more likely to use alcohol and drugs, and more likely to belong to a fraternity or sorority. Lower Income targets were rated as more likable, agreeable, conscientious, intelligent, creative, and better able to maintain close friendships. Future research directed toward the middle class could help fill a gap in the classism literature. Research of classism in higher education could shed light on a potentially divisive issue among undergraduate populations.

Socioeconomic Stereotypes among Undergraduate College Students

Classism involves stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination based on socioeconomic status (SES). Classist stereotypes would involve beliefs attributed to individuals because of their membership in a SES category, prejudice would involve negative evaluations based on this membership, and discrimination would involve a change in behavior directed towards individuals based on their SES (Fiske, 1998; Lott, 2002).

Most of the literature on classism has focused on the economic extremes of poverty and wealth (Stacey, Singer, & Ritchie, 1989; Orpen, 1991; Baron, Albright, & Malloy, 1995; Kirby, 1999; Cozzarelli, Wilkinson, & Tagler, 2001; Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002; Lott & Saxon, 2002; Luthar & Becker, 2002). The present study diverged from this literature by examining classism among middle and upper class students at a small, private, liberal arts college. Although socioeconomic divisions do exist on college campuses (Astin & Oseguera, 2004), the majority of college students do not come from lower income groups (Paulsen & St. John, 2002); consequently, stereotypes based on poverty may not be particularly salient when students are evaluating each other. However, classism may surface when students make social distinctions between middle class versus upper class peers – the economic divisions prevalent in their milieu on campus.

Although the present study did not address low income students, a review of the classism literature can not ignore the preponderance of research on stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination directed towards those struggling with poverty (Stacey, *et al.*, 1989; Orpen, 1991; Baron, *et al.*, 1995; Kirby, 1999; Cozzarelli, *et al.*, 2001; Johannesen-Schmidt, & Eagly, 2002; Lott & Saxon, 2002; Luthar & Becker, 2002). This literature has indicated that stereotypes held towards lower SES groups were generally more negative than those attributed to higher SES groups. Cozzarelli, *et al.* (2001) found that attributions for people in poverty tend to focus more

on personal rather than situational attributions, with low income targets rated as having more negative traits, e.g., lazy, unkind, stupid, alcoholic, and drug abuse, while middle class targets were rated as having more positive traits, e.g., hardworking, healthy, intelligent, and nice. These types of attributions may be fueled by a belief in a just world (Lerner & Simmons, 1966) which suggests that those living in poverty must have done something wrong to deserve their current economic situation. Orpen (1991) found that Australian undergraduates rated wealthy targets as likely to “steal less, to feel better about themselves, to be more intelligent, to make better grades, and to be more likely to succeed” than poor targets (p. 897). Skafta (2001) examined the ratings of poor and wealthy strangers by adolescents. It was found that the poor targets were perceived as making friends less easily, working harder, and trying harder than wealthy targets, whereas wealthy targets were perceived as more intelligent, more likely to make better grades, and healthier than poor targets. Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002) found that participants rated wealthier targets more favorably but these ratings diminished for extremely wealthy targets.

Bullock (1995) suggested that in addition to personal attributes, physical attributes are also stereotyped based on SES. In television programs, women who are from a higher SES are often portrayed as more attractive than women who are from lower SES backgrounds (Bullock, 1995). This suggests that a stereotype may exist for upper SES women as being more physically attractive than lower SES women.

In contrast to the majority of the literature on classism, Christopher and Schlenker (2000) examined stereotypes of target individuals that were presented as either “affluent” or “not so affluent,” i.e., as opposed to “impoverished”. Utilizing vignettes that manipulated wealth by changing the description of the home of the individual described, the researchers found that affluent characters were judged as having many positive qualities. However, negative qualities

were also associated with affluent characters, such as being “less kind, less likeable, less honest, less caring of others, less of a potential friend” (p. 14).

Although there are few studies examining classism among college students, SES on college campuses may have an effect on student performance as well as on expectations of how others will perform. One way to measure this is by examining stereotype threat, a situational phenomenon where individuals from a group that has negative stereotypes may act in a way that perpetuates these negative stereotypes (Steele, 1997). Croizet and Claire (1998) examined the effect that SES stereotype threat had on performance tasks, specifically on verbal problems similar to those found on the Graduate Record Examination (GRE). In this study, it was found that when undergraduate participants were told intellectual ability was being measured, low SES students performed worse than high SES students. However, no significant difference was found between low and high SES students when they were not told it was a measure of intellectual ability. Because SES stereotypes can affect performance of college students, it should be of great interest to colleges to identify and address classism in the undergraduate population.

Harris *et al.* (2004) conducted a study of classism at a small, private, liberal arts college in which participants read a fictitious interview with a female student whose family income was described as being in the bottom third or top third of the student body. It was found that the higher income target was rated as more snobbish and less altruistic while the lower income target was rated as more likely to be academically serious, work during college and summers, and to be involved in non-fraternal/sororal organizations. Female participants also rated the higher income target as being more likely to be in a sorority and more likely to drink alcohol.

The present study drew on Harris *et al.* (2004) by focusing on classism among college students from middle and upper class families. Following literature that has reported associations between SES and certain traits and behaviors (Orpen, 1991; Bullock, 1995; Kirby, 1999;

Christopher & Schlenker, 2000; Cozarelli *et al.* 2001; Skafte, 2001; Johannesen-Schmidt & Eagly, 2002; Harris *et al.*, 2004), the study employed a questionnaire to assess positive and negative evaluations, i.e., prejudice, students direct towards middle and upper class peers, as well as their stereotypes concerning these peers' agreeability, conscientiousness, sociability and friendships, tendency to be judgmental, intelligence, creativity, attractiveness, drug and alcohol use, and membership in fraternal/sororal organizations. Based on previous literature, sex differences (Harris *et al.*, 2004) and ingroup and outgroup biases based on participant SES (Fiske, 1998) were also examined.

Method

Participants

Participants were 53 undergraduate students (36 women and 17 men) enrolled in a variety of psychology courses at a small, private, liberal arts college. Participant ages ranged from 18 to 22 years ($M = 19.0$, $SD = 1.2$). The family incomes reported by participants had a median of \$100,000 and an interquartile range of \$55,000 to \$300,000.

Classifying people according to SES is fraught with difficulty because of the variety of conflicting taxonomies in the literature and because of the problems inherent in applying simplistic labels to large diverse groups of people (Bullock, 1995). Given the range and median income of participants in the present study, the general classification of middle to upper class was probably appropriate for this sample. However, within the context of this sample and for the purposes of this study, Participant Income groups were defined using a median split with participants falling below the \$100,000 median designated as "Lower Income Participants" ($n = 29$) and participants falling above this median designated as "Upper Income Participants" ($n = 24$). The Lower Income group had a median income of \$60,000 and an interquartile range of \$42,500 to \$80,000, i.e., "Lower Income" for our study, but still middle class by most standards.

The Upper Income group had and a median income of \$300,000 and an interquartile range of \$200,500 to \$750,000.

Measurement

Instructions and measures were computer administered using E-Prime v 1.1 Service Pack 3 (Schneider, Eschman, & Zuccolotto, 2002). Participants were randomly assigned one of two Target Income conditions. In the “Lower Income Target” condition, participants were asked to imagine a fellow student whose family income was among the lowest at their college. In the “Upper Income Target” condition, the same instructions were given with participants asked to imagine a fellow student whose family income was among the highest at their college. In order to conceal the SES focus of the study, this income information was embedded in a larger description including the target’s age, given as 20, and class standing, given as sophomore.

Before responding to the questionnaire, the Target Income designation was reinforced by having participants read a fictitious 6-question interview used for the same purpose by Harris *et al.* (2004). In the fourth question of the interview, the target was asked, “What do you think of the price of tuition here at [College]?” For the Lower Income Target, the response was, “It’s expensive. Unfortunately, it’s been a real struggle for my family to pay my tuition.” For the Upper Income Target the response was, “It’s expensive. Fortunately, it’s not really a problem for my family to pay my tuition.” In order to conceal the SES focus of the study, the remaining five interview questions were unrelated to income and were identical for the two conditions.

Following the fictitious interview, participants completed the questionnaire. First, Prejudice was measured with a single question asking “to what degree do you think you would like or dislike: a [College] sophomore that is 20 years old and whose family income is among the highest/lowest at [College]?”. Participants rated Prejudice on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Dislike very much* to 5 = *Like very much*.

Following the Prejudice measure, Stereotypes were assessed with 28-items asking “to what degree does the following adjective describe a [College] sophomore that is 20 years old and whose family income is among the highest/lowest at [College]?” followed by one of the 28 attributes. These attributes were developed for this study, presented in random order, and measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = *Not at all* to 5 = *Very much*.

Some of the Stereotype items were conceptually linked and were combined into scales, while other items were conceptually distinct attributes or behaviors and, consequently, were analyzed individually. All of the scales developed for this study yielded acceptable reliabilities: the Agreeableness Scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .82$) included the attributes *caring*, *respectful*, *kind*, and the reverse coded *snobbish* and *self-centered*; the Conscientiousness Scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .88$) included the attributes *academically serious*, *hardworking*, *self-disciplined*, and the reverse coded *disorganized*, *lazy*, and *unreliable*, and; the Sociability Scale (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .75$) included the attributes *extraverted*, *has a lot of friends*, *social*, and the reversed scored *loner*.

Items examined individually included Judgmental, Attractive, Creative, Intelligent, Maintains Close Friendships, Consumes Alcohol, Uses Drugs, and Fraternal/Sororal Membership.

Finally, participants were also asked to report their age, sex, and family income.

Procedure

Students participated in groups of up to 15 in a classroom setting with laptop computers arranged so that each participant was afforded privacy. While participants were randomly assigned to Target Income conditions, they were not grouped according Participant Income conditions since family income was measured on the questionnaire and not available until after the study was completed.

The instructions informed participants that they were participating in a study that

examined “how quickly and accurately people categorize objects and persons” (Perdue *et al.*, 1990, p. 480). Participants were not informed that the study was about classism.

Participants remained silently in their seats until the entire group completed the study to minimize distractions. The study took approximately 15 to 30 minutes to complete. A debriefing statement about the true nature of the study was sent to participants via e-mail when the research was concluded.

Results

Measures of Prejudice and Stereotypes were analyzed using a series of 2 x 2 x 2 Analyses of Variance with the independent variables of Target Income (Lower vs. Upper), Participant Income (Lower vs. Upper), and Sex. The number of participants per cell ranged from eleven to four. These analyses did not yield statistically significant main effects for Participant Income or Sex, but did yield significant main effects for Target Income on all of the dependent variables. The statistics for the main effects for Target Income are presented in Table 1.

For Prejudice, higher scores indicated greater liking for Lower Income Targets than for Upper Income Targets (see Table 1). This main effect was qualified by a significant Target Income by Participant Income interaction ($F_{1,45} = 4.22, p = .046, \eta^2 = .09$). The Lower Income Participants reported greater liking for the Lower Income Target ($M = 4.3, SD = 0.7$) compared to the Upper Income Target ($M = 3.1, SD = 0.6$). This effect was less pronounced in Upper Income Participants' Prejudice scores for the Lower ($M = 3.6, SD = 1.2$) and Upper ($M = 3.33, SD = 0.65$) Income Targets.

For the Stereotype scale measures, main effects indicated that the Lower Income Target scores were significantly higher for the Agreeableness and Conscientiousness Scales, and significantly lower for the Sociability Scale. There were no significant interactions.

For the individual items assessing Stereotypes, the Lower Income Target scored

significantly higher on Maintains Close Friendships, Intelligent, and Creative; the Higher Income Target score significantly higher on Judgmental, Attractive, Consumes Alcohol, Uses Drugs, and Fraternal/Sororal Membership.

Several of the individual item main effects were qualified by interactions. The effect for Judgmental was qualified by a significant three-way interaction ($F_{1,45} = 7.11, p = .011, \eta^2 = .14$). The Lower Income Target was given lower Judgmental ratings by Lower Income women (Lower Income Target: $M = 2.0, SD = 1.3$; Upper Income Target: $M = 4.2, SD = 0.8$) and by Upper Income Men (Lower Income Target: $M = 2.8, SD = 0.5$; Upper Income Target: $M = 4.6, SD = 0.6$). These differences in ratings were less pronounced among Upper Income women (Lower Income Target: $M = 2.9, SD = 1.6$; Upper Income Target: $M = 3.3, SD = 1.1$) and Lower Income men (Lower Income Target: $M = 3.3, SD = 0.5$; Upper Income Target: $M = 3.5, SD = 0.6$).

The effect for Intelligent was qualified by significant two- and three-way interactions. A two-way Target Income by Participant Income interaction ($F_{1,45} = 4.38, p = .042, \eta^2 = .09$) indicated that Lower Income Participants rated the Lower Income Target ($M = 4.3, SD = 0.7$) higher on Intelligent compared to the Upper Income target ($M = 3.1, SD = 0.6$), whereas scores for Upper Income Participants showed little difference between the Lower Income ($M = 4.0, SD = 1.0$) and the Upper Income ($M = 3.4, SD = 0.7$) targets. The three-way interaction ($F_{1,45} = 4.30, p = .044, \eta^2 = .09$) indicated that the Lower Income Target was rated higher on Intelligent by Lower Income women (Lower Income Target: $M = 4.1, SD = 0.7$; Upper Income Target: $M = 3.1, SD = 0.7$), Upper Income women (Lower Income Target: $M = 4.1, SD = 1.0$; Upper Income Target: $M = 3.1, SD = 0.4$), and Lower Income men (Lower Income Target: $M = 4.8, SD = 0.5$; Upper Income Target: $M = 3.0, SD = 0.0$). However, there was little difference for Intelligent scores for Upper Income men (Lower Income Target: $M = 3.8, SD = 1.0$; Upper Income Target: $M = 3.8, SD = 0.8$).

The main effect for Creative was qualified by a significant Target Income by Sex interaction ($F_{1,45} = 7.88, p = .007, \eta^2 = .15$). Men rated the Lower Income Target ($M = 4.1, SD = 0.4$) higher on Creative compared to the Upper Income Target ($M = 2.4, SD = 0.5$). However, this difference was less pronounced when women rated Lower Income ($M = 3.4, SD = 0.8$) and Upper Income ($M = 2.9, SD = 0.7$) targets.

Discussion

The results of the present study supported the hypothesis that classism would be present in this middle to upper class college sample. With regard to the Prejudice measure, the Upper Income Target was rated as less likeable, particularly among Lower Income Participants. The findings were consistent with Johannesen-Schmidt and Eagly (2002) and Harris, *et al.* (2004) whose findings suggested greater levels of prejudice towards higher income as compared to middle income targets.

The Prejudice findings were mirrored in the Stereotype results. Overall, more positive stereotypes were attributed to the Lower Income Target who was rated higher on Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Maintains Close Friendships, Intelligent, and Creative. The Upper Income Target was rated higher on negative stereotypes such as being Judgmental, Consumes Alcohol, and Uses Drugs. Two positive stereotypes were attributed to the Upper Income Target who received higher scores on Sociability and Attractiveness. The Upper Income Target was also rated higher on the neutral stereotype of Fraternal/Sororal membership.

A number of the Stereotype findings were consistent with previous research on classism. For example, the high Agreeableness and Conscientiousness scores for the Lower Income Target were consistent with Christopher and Schlenker (2000) and Harris, *et al.* (2004) whose findings suggested that middle income targets were considered to be kinder, more likeable, and harder working compared to upper income targets. The high Attractiveness scores for the Upper Income

Target were consistent with Bullock's (1995) finding that the media portrayed higher SES women as more attractive. Also, the high scores for the Upper Income Target on Consuming Alcohol and Fraternal/Sororal membership were consistent with research by Harris et al. (2004) who found that higher income female targets were rated as more likely to belong to sororities and to drink alcohol. However, the alcohol and drug findings seemed an interesting contrast to Cozzarelli *et al.* (2001) who found these stereotypes were more likely to be attributed to lower SES groups. This inconsistency can probably be explained by differences in samples for the two studies. Given the income profile of the student body for the present study, the Lower Income Target would probably fit the middle class designation used in the Cozzarelli *et al.* (2001) study; use of intoxicants may be attributed to higher SES groups when the comparison group is a moderate rather than a truly low SES group.

Although the high Sociability score for the Upper Income Target was consistent with past literature (Skafte, 2001; Harris *et al.*, 2004), the high scores on Maintains Close Friendships for the Lower Income Target was a new finding. Given this pattern of results, it is possible that participants view upper income peers as being more socially adept (recall that the scale included *extraverted, a lot of friends, social, unlikely to be a loner*) but not as adept as their lower income peers at establishing close relationships.

Some results were not consistent with the literature. For example, all participants except for Upper Income Men rated the Lower Income Target higher on Intelligent. These results were inconsistent with Christopher and Schlenker's (2000) findings that higher SES groups are associated with intelligence. However, Christopher and Schlenker (2000) did not examine SES stereotypes as directed specifically towards college students. It is possible that in the context of higher education, particularly at a private college, stereotypes associate lower income students with merit based scholarships, i.e., an indicator of intelligence, while upper income students may

be able to pay for the entire tuition without necessarily having to rely on such scholarships. Why this stereotype was not shared by upper income men is more difficult to explain.

A number of the interactions with sex found in the present study were puzzling. For example, while the Upper Income Target was rated higher on being Judgmental, this perception was particularly pronounced in Upper Income men and Lower Income women. It is possible that Lower Income participants would view their outgroup as more judgmental, but it was not clear why Upper Income men would share this view and Lower Income men would not. Another interaction indicated that the Lower Income Target was rated higher on being Creative, particularly by male participants. This finding may be a product of the “starving artist” stereotype that suggests that individuals who are artistic tend to be in the lower SES. Why this stereotype would be more evident in men than women was unknown.

The present study had limitations in the size and scope of the sample, the limited context of the small college campus, and the exclusive reliance on self-report methodology. However, the pattern of significant results should encourage future classism research that includes a wider variety of contexts, SES groups, and research methodologies. Much of the literature thus far has supported the idea that classism is primarily directed towards the lowest SES groups by those with higher incomes (Stacey, *et al.*, 1989; Orpen, 1991; Baron, *et al.*, 1995; Kirby, 1999; Cozzarelli, *et al.*, 2001; Johannesen-Schmidt, & Eagly, 2002; Lott & Saxon, 2002; Luthar & Becker, 2002). The present research suggests that, at least in a college environment, classism may also be directed towards those in the highest SES groups by those in middle SES groups. Future research examining classism in different contexts and among a larger range of income groups might solidify our findings and show this phenomenon as more complex than previously considered.

Research like the present study should be of interest to colleges and universities. Socially,

classism may be a divisive force on campus that fosters negative interactions between students. With regard to academic performance, because Upper Income targets were rated lower on intelligence, creativity, and conscientiousness, precautions should be taken so that stereotype threat (Croizet & Claire, 1998) does not become a reality on college campuses, causing upper income students to underachieve in their coursework. If the issues of classism could be addressed during freshman orientation, and dealt with in other interventions throughout the undergraduate process, institutions of higher education could become more comfortable and supportive environments for students of all income levels.

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Table 1

Main Effects for Target Income

	Lower Income		Upper Income		$F_{1,45}$	η^2
	M	SD	M	SD		
Prejudice	4.0	1.0	3.2	0.6	9.19	.17 [†]
Agreeableness Scale	4.0	0.5	2.8	0.5	56.33	.56 [‡]
Conscientiousness Scale	4.2	0.6	2.9	0.4	66.00	.60 [‡]
Sociability Scale	3.2	0.6	4.0	0.6	16.31	.27 [‡]
Maintains Close Friendships	3.8	0.9	3.4	0.6	5.25	.10 [*]
Judgmental	2.6	1.3	3.9	0.9	13.74	.23 [‡]
Intelligent	4.2	0.8	3.2	0.7	18.08	.29 [‡]
Creative	3.6	0.7	2.7	0.7	30.72	.41 [‡]
Attractive	3.0	0.9	3.6	0.6	4.46	.09 [*]
Consumes Alcohol	3.0	0.9	4.3	0.8	26.34	.37 [‡]
Uses Drugs	2.4	1.1	3.4	0.9	10.15	.18 [†]
Fraternal/Sororal Membership	2.3	0.9	3.9	0.9	27.95	.38 [‡]

* $p < .05$. [†] $p < .01$. [‡] $p < .001$.