

# Class: Power, Privilege, and Influence in the United States

## Classism Defined

The criteria for determining class membership or identity can be easily debated. Class has been variously defined by origins, workforce status, income, and educational background. The primary emphasis is on the economics of class. Some consider all who derive their income from wages as members of the working class; others exclude professionals and managers whose incomes are high enough to provide a stake in the capitalist system. Depending on the breadth of the definition, 70-85% of the population can be considered working class. This is true despite the fact that the individuals may identify themselves as members of the middle class.

Classism is the systematic oppression of subordinated groups (people without endowed or acquired economic power, social influence, and privilege) who work for wages for the dominant group (those who have access to control of the necessary resources by which other people make their living). Classism is held in place by a system of beliefs that ranks people according to economic status, family lineage, job, and level of education. Classism says that dominant group members are smarter and more articulate than working class subordinated groups. In this way, dominant group members (uppermiddle class and wealthy people) define for everyone else what is “normal” or “acceptable” in the class hierarchy.

Class affects people not only on an economic level, but also on an emotional level. “Classist” attitudes have caused great pain by dividing subordinated group members from one another and suppressing individual means for personal fulfillment or survival. It is not unusual to find a level of collusion between subordinated group members and dominant group members as a means of survival by gaining access to some of the privilege retained by the dominant group. There is also a fair amount of internalized oppression experienced by some subordinated group members, i.e., a disdain or shame about traditional patterns of class in ones family and a denial of heritage.

## What Dominant Groups Can Do About Classism

A major feature of the “classist” mindset is the stereotype that suggests that poor and working class people are unintelligent, inarticulate, and “overly emotional.” A good ally (a dominant group member willing to partner to eliminate classism) will contradict these messages by soliciting the knowledge and histories of impoverished and working class people (members of the subordinated groups). Dominant group allies can also engage subordinated group members by being a thoughtful, considerate listener. When subordinated group members talk about their experiences, it is most helpful for an ally to resist becoming defensive and expressing their own guilt. It is also extremely helpful for dominant group members to refrain from criticizing how the message is being presented. Some ways of becoming an ally include:

- Claim your identity. Learn all you can about your history as a dominant group member.
- Learn the history and experience of all working and impoverished people (particularly people living in your neighborhood or community).
- Raise your children to be anti-classist rather than merely being non-classist in their own behavior. This means becoming active allies with subordinated group members to improve the quality of life for all.
- Give yourself and your children exposure and experience of the language and culture of working peoples.
- Listen with compassion when a member of the subordinated group relays experiences and feelings. Ask for clarification when needed and respond.