

Strangers Can Detect Social Class in Just Seven Words

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New research shows that a person's social class is communicated in very brief interactions and maybe even in a few words. Combined with prior research, these findings support the idea that brief, everyday experiences can reinforce and even create class boundaries and inequality.

Researchers from Yale University and the University of California-San Francisco published their findings in the May issue of *Perspectives on Psychological Science*. The data from these studies showed that participants were able to guess the approximate income level of another person using one of three cues: a 60-second video of their behavior, 20 photos from their Facebook profile, or recordings of them speaking seven standard, isolated words.

“We thought, ‘what would be crazy? How little information is enough to give us some information about class?’” says Michael Kraus, assistant professor of organizational behavior at the Yale University School of Management and first author on the article.

In all three tests, participants could identify income levels at rates better than chance, and those who listened to the recordings of seven spoken words had the most accurate guesses. After initial testing, Kraus recalls thinking, “Actually, this might work. And it might tell us some kind of scary things about

hierarchy and how it's reproduced in informal interactions.”

Social inequality has wide-ranging effects, well beyond a person's job and bank account. Research shows that socioeconomic categories can restrict individuals' choices across many domains, including health and nutrition, education, housing, and lending. Higher inequality, whether country-wide or within a neighborhood, has been linked to poor well-being and social conflict.

“If we really want to accurately convey how we make decisions in society, how we make decisions about mobility, how we make decisions about hiring people, we need to acknowledge that these biases leak in and how easily they do so,” says Kraus.

Previous studies have established that social signals are everywhere, and people pay attention to them whether they realize it or not. Everyday social cues serve as reminders of barriers and activate class comparisons. The authors put forth that they can also create stratification by eliciting beliefs and behaviors that strengthen class boundaries and broaden the gap between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots.’ The fact that these social cues are so prevalent in everyday life and seem to be easily recognized may help to perpetuate the class-related stereotypes and attitudes that people hold, including dehumanizing those in higher social classes and rationalizing unfairness toward those in lower classes.

“I think that inequalities of sharing of resources is probably the fundamental challenge that our society faces,” says Kraus of his motivations for doing this research. “Understanding more about how inequality operates and how it reproduces itself can help us make a more meaningful pitch to policymakers, to philanthropists, to social change agents about how important these issues are.”

References

Kraus, M. W., Park, J. W., & Tan, J. J. X. (2017). Signs of social class: The experience of economic inequality in everyday life. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, *12*, 422–435.
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