

Position and Prestige

America is a nation of tribes.

—*People Like Us*, PBS

Prestige or status—the terms can be used interchangeably—is a sentiment in the minds of people that is expressed in social interaction. In almost any social setting, we note that some individuals are considered people of consequence, looked up to, and deferred to (though sometimes resented), while others are thought of as ordinary, unimportant, even lowly. Sociologists think of prestige as a ranking or scale based on degrees of social esteem. They find that groups of people similar in prestige tend to draw together and develop common lifestyles. Max Weber, whose views on stratification we examined in the last chapter, called them “status groups.” We can call them prestige classes.

People Like Us

People Like Us: Social Class in America, a provocative documentary aired on Public Television, explored these themes (Alvarez and Kolker 1999). *People Like Us* probes the ways Americans experience prestige differences and offers revealing glimpses of the raw emotions lingering just beneath the surface when Americans, like those quoted below, talk about class.

Thomas Langhorne Phipps: I am a member of the privileged American class known as the WASPs,¹ the silver spoon people, the people who were handed things from an early age. . . . We stand better, we walk better, we speak better, we dress better, we eat better, we’re smarter, we’re more cultured, and we treat people better—we’re nicer, and we’re more attractive, and that was built into my sense of who I was growing up. . . . I got a phone call from somebody who decided he wanted to become a WASP . . . [and] would pay me [for] WASP lessons in style. And it was sad because the whole point is

¹Literally, white Angle-Saxon Protestant. Refers to the traditional American upper class.

. . . *you either are it or you aren't, we believe.* That's the tribal belief, that you either have it or you don't.

Bill Bear, Plumber:

I'm standing in line [waiting to pay a bill] and because of the way I'm dressed, I have a tendency to be overlooked, you know? [T]hey really don't want to deal with me. They want to deal with Mr. Suit-and-Tie. . . . I almost started a riot. . . . I had to make it known that I was next, not Mr. Suit-and-Tie. If you want to deal with the son of a bitch, make a date with him later, you know? But *just because I have on working clothes doesn't mean can't afford to pay my bill, baby.* Well, then she got all embarrassed about that and the manager came out . . . and I just exploded. And uh, there was about four working-class guys in there, they all started applauding. 'Cause they felt the same way. You know? Because society does that automatically.

Barbara Brannen-Newton:

I am from the middle class because that's where I was born and that's where I live. Socioeconomically, statistically *we are middle class. But we're black middle class,* and we will always have that word black in front of us until the day I die.

Ginie Polo Sayles:

When I was in high school, I went to a country club with a girlfriend. . . . I had never been to a country club, and we went swimming in the summer, and she said, "Let's go over to the clubhouse and have some fried shrimp and charge it to my daddy." And I'd never had fried shrimp. And I thought, what is that, what will it taste like, what will it look like, will I use the right fork? And what really hit me then was that there were limitations. And that's what I didn't like. *I didn't like the idea of feeling less than, ignorant, eliminated, limited by a class.*

Tammy Crabtree:

[Lives in a trailer that "embarrasses" her teenage son]: I was on welfare 18 years. And now, I work at Burger King, and I'm trying to make a living, and make a home for the kids. It ain't my fault 'cause I'm poor. I grew up poor. . . . Even when I'm walkin' to work or something, someone'll holler, "Ey! Trashy bitch! What're you doing?" I'm just walking to work. All I want is just a life where I can be happy. But right now, I'm not

because the way people treats me and the way my kids treat me. . . . *My son, he thinks he's high class and a preppie.* He's the best. He thinks he's better than me, better than his brothers. [All emphases added.]

People Like Us is often about respect and disrespect, from the blue-blood pride of Langhorne Phipps' people to the blue-collar anger of plumber Bill Bear. Barbara Brannen-Newton laments that an African American woman can never be fully middle class, however well brought up, educated, and successful she may be. Young Ginie Sayles is intimidated by the country club dining room. Hardworking Tammy Crabtree is made to feel like "trailer trash" by perfect strangers and her own son.

Respect and disrespect is another way of thinking about prestige. While the term *prestige* inevitably draws our gaze upward to Phipps' old-money elite, respect and disrespect broadens our vision to include people in the middle and at the bottom, who may feel injured by class distinctions.

Some of the people who appear in the documentary are trying to claim respect with lifestyle choices. Tammy Crabtree's teenage son disapproves of the way his mother dresses—often in her Burger King uniform—and is seeking higher status with his own clothes. A man whom the documentary identifies as "a social climber" tells the camera that he would never drive a Ford or even a Volvo; they send the wrong signals. An affluent couple shows us around their elegantly remodeled kitchen, noting the influences of Tuscany, southern Italy, and "[perhaps] an old French country kitchen or an English farmhouse."

We tour an upscale kitchenware store with satirist Joe Queenan, who draws our attention to various esoteric cooking implements and a slim bottle mysteriously labeled "Al Sapone di Tartufo Bianco." Those who know what these things are and can afford them belong here, explains Queenan. But if "you, a working-class person," don't and can't, perhaps you should go to Wal-Mart, where everything is identifiable. This store's customers are defining a lifestyle by surrounding themselves with sophisticated possessions and, at the same time, asserting a superior class position.

A recurring theme of *People Like Us* is that we are, in the words of the narrator, "a nation of tribes."² The members of our class tribe, according to the documentary, are the people we live among and feel comfortable with. They share our background and our lifestyle. The documentary sometimes suggests that the boundaries defining tribes are fixed and well defended, but it also provides ample evidence that people move from tribe to tribe.

Americans are famous for their ability to reinvent themselves. By the time we encounter Ginie Sayles, she has married a wealthy man and is wholly at ease in the country club settings that made her feel "ignorant" and "limited" as a teenager. We also meet Dana Felty, an ambitious young woman who left

²The narrator (like Phipps quoted earlier) is invoking, perhaps ironically, the dictionary definition of tribe: "A group of families, esp. of an ancient or indigenous people, claiming descent from a common ancestor, sharing a common culture, religion, dialect, etc." The term has been applied to the presumed original divisions of the ancient Romans and the mythical 12 tribes of Israel, as well as to the indigenous peoples of the Americas (Brown 1993: II, 3387).

her working-class home in rural Kentucky to attend Antioch College and start a career as a journalist in Washington, DC. Tammy Crabtree's teenage son, growing up in a trailer in rural Ohio, seems to have similar ambitions. The wealthy crowd we see attending a polo game includes people who have made considerable (and probably recent) fortunes in Internet ventures, finance, fashion, and other fields. Perhaps the members of this success elite yearn to join Langhorne Phipps' silver spoon upper class. Perhaps they couldn't care less. Phipps' people cherish the myth that admission is by birth only. But, as we will see in Chapter 3, the history of the American upper class contradicts this notion.

The tribes of *People Like Us*, like the prestige classes we will examine in this chapter, are more amorphous and porous than they might initially appear. Their indefinite character contributes to the ambitions and anxieties chronicled in the film. Americans, the documentary reminds us, are uncomfortable with class distinctions, which seem undemocratic to them. At the same time, they are aware of a prestige hierarchy and may feel pressured to improve their own rank. Unsure of where they stand, they demand respect, cultivate their manners, remake their wardrobes, and remodel their kitchens.

W. Lloyd Warner: Prestige Classes in Yankee City

People Like Us raises intriguing questions about the ways we understand and experience class differences. In particular, how do people create mental maps of the class system from their varied daily exposure to prestige distinctions? Can researchers turn their often vague and contradictory perceptions into coherent models of the class structure? One place we can look for answers is in early community studies conducted by W. Lloyd Warner and his students and colleagues. The first and most famous of these studies was done in the 1930s in a small New England town Warner called "Yankee City" (Warner and Lunt 1941; Warner et al. 1973).

Warner and his team began their research with the assumption that class distinctions people in Yankee City made among themselves would be determined by economic differences. The initial interviews tended to confirm this view. Their respondents spoke of "the big people with money" and "the little people who are poor." Property owners, bankers, and professionals were high status. Laborers, ditch diggers, and low-wage workers were low status.

However, after the researchers had been in Yankee City for a while, they began to doubt that social standing could so easily be equated with economic position, for they found that some people were placed higher or lower than their incomes would warrant. They noticed that certain doctors were ranked below others in the social hierarchy, even though they were regarded as better physicians, and that high prestige was associated with certain family names. Such distinctions were often made unconsciously, which made them all the more convincing to the researchers.

Warner discovered a hierarchy of prestige classes in Yankee City consisting of groups of people who were ranked by others in the community as socially superior or inferior. From his interviews and observations, he concluded that the place of individuals within this system was the result of a combination of economic and social variables that included wealth,

income, and occupation but also patterns of interaction, social behavior, and lifestyle. People of the same class tended to spend time together and, as a result, developed similar attitudes and values. Their children were likely to marry one another. Warner's Yankee City research had, in other words, led him to a conception of social class close to Weber's idea of "status group"—a communal group bound by shared prestige, lifestyle, values, and patterns of association.

Some of the patterns Warner observed were based on kinship. Children were assigned the status of their parents, and certain families had a prestige position that was not entirely explainable by their current wealth or income and seemed to flow from their ancestry, dating in some cases back to colonial times.

Warner noted that when a person had an equivalent rank on all the economic and social variables, people in Yankee City had no difficulty determining his or her prestige rank. But when someone had different scores on the several variables, ranking became problematic. This usually meant that the person was mobile and was changing position on one variable at a time. Consequently, time was an important factor in stratification placement. For example, if a man who started as the son of a laborer became successful in business, he would be likely to move to a "better" neighborhood, to join clubs of other business and professional men, and to send his children to college. However, if he himself did not have a college education and polished manners, he would never be fully accepted as a social equal by the businessmen who had Harvard degrees. His son, however, might well gain the full acceptance denied the father.

After several years of study by more than a dozen researchers, during which time 99 percent of the families in town were classified, Warner declared that there were six groupings distinct enough to be called classes (Warner and Lunt 1941:88):

Upper-upper class (1.4 percent). This group was the old-family elite, based on sufficient wealth to maintain a large house in the best neighborhood, but the wealth had to have been in the family for more than one generation. Generational continuity permitted proper training in basic values and established people as belonging to a lineage.

Lower-upper class (1.6 percent). This group was, on average, slightly richer than the upper-uppers, but their money was newer, their manners were therefore not quite so polished, and their sense of lineage and security was less pronounced.

Upper-middle class (10.2 percent). Business and professional men and their families who were moderately successful but less affluent than the lower-uppers. Some education and polish were necessary for membership, but lineage was unimportant.

Lower-middle class (28.1 percent). The small businessmen, the school-teachers, and the foremen in industry. This group tended to have morals that were close to those of Puritan Fundamentalism; they were church-goers, lodge joiners, and flag wavers.

Upper-lower class (32.6 percent). The solid, respectable laboring people, who kept their houses clean and stayed out of trouble.

Lower-lower class (25.2 percent). The “lulus” or disrespectable and often slovenly people who dug clams and waited for public relief. (The relatively high proportion of people in this category apparently reflects the difficult economic conditions of the Great Depression, when the study was conducted.)

Among the notable features of this schema of Yankee City classes are the following: (1) the distinction, at the top, between an old-money elite, the product of New England’s long history, and a class of families with more recent fortunes; (2) the distinction between those who work with their hands—members of the bottom two classes, comprising more than half the population—and those who do not, in the higher classes; and (3) the attribution (presumably reflecting what Warner and his associates heard in Yankee City) of moral status to class position—the lower-lowers are, for example, “disrespectable,” while those above them have Puritan morals and are “respectable” or “clean.”

Once the general system became clear to him, Warner said, he used clique and association memberships as a shorthand index of prestige position. Thus, among men, there were certain small social clubs that were open only to upper-uppers, the Rotary was primarily upper-middle in membership, the fraternal lodges were lower-middle, and the craft unions were upper-lower. It seems that in cases of doubt, intimate clique interactions were the crucial test: A repeated invitation home to dinner appeared to be, for Warner, the best sign of prestige equality between persons who were not relatives.

Prestige Class as a Concept

Warner maintained that the breaks between all these prestige classes were quite clear-cut, except for that between the lower-middle and the upper-lower. But when Warner said that the distinctions between the classes were clear-cut, he did not mean that people in Yankee City could necessarily give a consistent account of them. Like many Americans, they were uncomfortable with the idea of social inequality. After all, the American creed says that we are born equal. Some Yankee City residents were quite aware of class differences and could describe them. Some denied that classes existed while acting as if they did. Social ranking was often an unconscious process.

But if ranking is unconscious, how can researchers learn about it? The answer, for Warner and his colleagues, was listening to what people said and observing their behavior over an extended period. As this suggests, Warner’s version of Yankee City’s class system is not a summary of what residents told him about it, nor is it a simple reflection of life in Yankee City. Instead, it is an abstraction from reality, based on systematic questioning, listening, and observation. Warner’s analysis is a map of the prestige class system. Like any map, it is a simplification of complicated terrain, ignoring irregularities and focusing on what the mapmaker regards as major features.

How Many Classes?

Describing the structure of prestige classes in a community is inevitably problematic. The analyst wants to know how many classes there are and where boundaries between them are located, but soon discovers that there is little consensus on these matters. One reason, according to a study of a small Southern town by three Warner colleagues, is that the class structure looks different from the perspectives of people at different class levels (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 1941). Their report, titled *Deep South*, demonstrated this phenomenon with a chart showing how the people at each level perceive the people at other levels. It is reproduced here as Figure 2.1.

Based on patterns of association and lifestyles, the researchers found six classes among the town's white population, similar to the Yankee City classes. The six boxes in the chart show how the class structure appeared to people in each of these classes. Think of them as windows, each of them showing the distinctive perspective from which a particular class views the class structure. Between the boxes, there are abbreviated labels delineating the classes described by the researchers (UU = upper-upper class, LM = lower-middle class, etc. See the note below Figure 2.1). Within the individual boxes, horizontal lines indicate perceived class distinctions—with solid lines marking a distinct social cleavage and broken lines suggesting less social distance between adjacent classes.

A comparison between the upper-upper class window and the lower-lower class window, diagonally across the chart, reveals large gaps in perceptions. The lower-lowers lump the people in the top three classes into one big class ("Society or folks with money"). Similarly, the upper-uppers collapse the two bottom classes into one ("Po' whites"). People in both classes make more class distinctions at their own level. The labels they use for one another are quite different. For example, the lower-lowers describe the people at the top with phrases suggesting wealth and social pretense, while the upper-uppers describe themselves and nearby classes in terms emphasizing inherited position, social prestige, and respectability.

Some important conclusions about perceptions of the class structure in this Southern town and elsewhere can be drawn from the chart. (Like the chart itself, these points tend to underestimate the differences of perception *within* classes, while usefully highlighting the differences between classes.)

1. *Number of classes.* People at all class levels perceive a hierarchy of class differences and generally agree on where people rank in the hierarchy, but there is disagreement about the number of classes in the community. No class recognizes a structure of six classes, corresponding to the Warner's classes. Instead, they see four or five.
2. *Perception and distance.* People make more distinctions among those close to themselves in the hierarchy than among those who are far away. That tendency emerged sharply in the mutual perceptions of the upper-uppers and lower-lowers described in *Deep South*.
3. *Coincidence of cleavages.* Despite class differences in the number of classes perceived at various levels in the hierarchy, the distinctions

FIGURE 2.1 The Social Perspectives of the Social Classes

Upper-upper class		Lower-upper class	
“Old aristocracy”	UU	“Old aristocracy”	UU
“Aristocracy,” but not “old”	LU	“Aristocracy,” but not “old”	LU
“Nice, respectable people”	UM	“Nice, respectable people”	UM
“Good people, but nobody”	LM	“Good people, but nobody”	LM
“Po’ whites”	UL	“Po’ whites”	UL
	LL		LL
Upper-middle class		Lower-middle class	
“Society” {	UU	“Old aristocracy”	“Broken-down aristocracy”
	LU	“Old aristocracy” (older)	“Broken-down aristocracy” (younger)
“People who should be upper class”	UM	“People who think they are somebody”	
“People who don’t have much money”	LM	“We poor folk”	
“No ’count lot”	UL	“People poorer than us”	
	LL	“No ’count lot”	
Upper-lower class		Lower-lower class	
“Society” or the “folks with money”	UU	“Society” or the “folks with money”	
“People who are up because they have a little money”	LU	“Way-high-ups,” but not “society”	
“Poor but honest folk”	UM	“Snobs trying to push up”	
“Shiftless people”	LM	“People just as good as anybody”	
	UL		
	LL		

Source: Reprinted from page 65 of *Deep South: A Social-Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, by Allison Davis, Burleigh B. Gardner, and Mary R. Gardner. Reprinted by permission of University of Chicago Press.

Note: UU = upper-upper class; LU = lower-upper class; UM = upper-middle class; LM = lower-middle class; UL = upper-lower class; LL = lower-lower class.

actually made by people from different classes coincide. For example, the line that the lower-lowers drew between “society” and the “way-high-ups but not society” was the same as the upper-uppers’ distinction between “nice respectable people” and “good people but

nobody.” That is, when the researchers asked people about specific families, they found that the lower-lowers and upper-uppers agreed on their class position even though they employed different names for classes.

4. *Basis of class distinctions.* People often agree about where individuals or families belong in the class hierarchy, but not about why they are there. In other words, they find different bases for class distinctions. For example, people at the top understand class position in terms of time; they distinguish between “old” families and “new” families. People in the middle make moral evaluations of how things “should be.” People in the lower class view the system as a hierarchy of wealth.

Many years after *Deep South* was published, the essential conclusion of the study remains valid: How we perceive the class structure depends on our position within the structure.

Class Structure of the Metropolis

Several decades after the appearance of the original Yankee City report, two of Warner’s former students, Richard Coleman and Lee Rainwater, published the results of their study of prestige classes in two metropolitan areas: Boston and Kansas City. Working in metropolitan areas, Coleman and Rainwater could not duplicate the detailed ethnographic investigation that Warner conducted in Yankee City. Nonetheless, their book *Social Standing in America* (1978) shows the influence of their mentor, to whose memory the book is dedicated.

Social Standing in America was an ambitious undertaking, involving 900 interviews in the two cities. The statistical procedures employed were designed to provide representative samples of adults in Greater Boston and Greater Kansas City. Interviews were standardized and followed a fixed schedule of questions in the style of a social survey, but many questions were open-ended, allowing respondents to describe the class system in their own terms.

The hierarchy of prestige classes that Coleman and Rainwater (1978) stitched together from their analysis of the interviews is rather complex, so we offer a simplified, schematic version in Table 2.1. (Note that the annual incomes were recorded in 1971 dollars. Multiplying these amounts by six will give roughly equivalent values in today’s dollars). Inspection of the table shows that the basic structure of the hierarchy is parallel to the one found by Warner in Yankee City. For instance, in both studies, the upper-upper and lower-upper classes correspond to a distinction between established families and “new money,” although the distinction might be noticed only by those who are themselves close to the top. In Boston, the upper-class respondents spoke of the former as “the tip-top—as close to an aristocracy as you’ll find in America. . . . Yankee families that go way back; the WASPs who were here first . . . the bluebloods with inherited income—they live on stocks and bonds” (p. 150). The same respondents described the lower-uppers as

TABLE 2.1 Coleman and Rainwater's Metropolitan Class Structure

Class	Typical Occupations or Source of Income	Typical Education	Annual Income, 1971	Percent of Families
I. Upper Americans				
Upper-upper Old rich, aristocratic family name	Inherited wealth	Ivy League college degree; often postgraduate	Over \$60,000	2
Lower-upper Success elite	Top professionals; senior corporate executives	Good colleges; often postgraduate	Over \$60,000	
Upper-middle Professional and managerial	Middle professionals and managers	College degree; often postgraduate	\$20,000 to \$60,000	19
II. Middle Americans				
Middle class	Lower level managers; small-business owners; lower status professionals (pharmacists, teachers); sales and clerical	High school plus some college	\$10,000 to \$20,000	31
Working class	Higher blue-collar (craftsmen, truck drivers); lowest paid sales and clerical	High school diploma for younger persons	\$7,500 to \$15,000	35
III. Lower Americans				
Semipoor	Unskilled labor and service	Part high school	\$4,500 to \$6,000	13
The bottom	Often unemployed; welfare	Primary school	Less than \$4,500	

Source: From *Social Standing in America* by Richard P. Coleman and Lee Rainwater. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, a member of Perseus Books Group.

Note: We adjusted percentages for undersampling of "Lower Americans," acknowledged by authors.

a mix of highly successful executives, doctors, and lawyers with [very high] incomes. . . . They have help in the house, fancy cars, frequent and expensive vacations, and at least two houses. . . . They're not considered top society because they don't have the right background—they're newer money, with less tradition in their lifestyle. (p. 151)

At the other end of the class structure, Coleman and Rainwater delineated a bottom class characterized by dependence on irregular, marginal employment or public relief, often shifting from one to the other. As in Yankee City, Boston and Kansas City families in this class were regarded as less than respectable and described in terms suggesting that they were physically and morally “unclean.” However, many of Coleman and Rainwater’s respondents made a distinction, which was incorporated into the model, between families on the very bottom and a class of semipoor families who worked more regularly and were slightly more orderly in their lifestyles.

As portrayed by Coleman and Rainwater, then, the classes of “upper America” and “lower America” neatly parallel corresponding prestige groupings in Yankee City. The same would appear to be true of “middle America,” where Coleman and Rainwater’s middle class and working class are equivalent to Warner’s lower-middle and upper-lower classes. However, it was in the middle range of the class structure that they had the hardest time organizing the views of Kansas City and Boston respondents into prestige categories. In judging prestige, city respondents at this level gave almost exclusive emphasis to income and standard of living and paid relatively little attention to other stratification variables, such as occupation and association that had seemed important to Warner.

Coleman and Rainwater reported that their middle-American respondents recognized three levels among themselves, often called “people at the comfortable standard of living,” “people just getting along,” and “people who aren’t lower class but are having a real hard time” (pp. 158–159). But the two sociologists found these categories inadequate and insisted on a more traditional distinction between middle class and working class (each of which, they suggest, can be subdivided along income lines). The distinction the researchers made was essentially between **white-collar** and **blue-collar workers** (office workers versus manual workers). They decided to place the lowest paid white-collar workers in the working-class category. But there are no blue-collar workers, even the best paid, in their middle class. Thus, a highly skilled, well-paid electrician is working class in their schema (see Table 2.1).

How do Coleman and Rainwater justify substituting their own judgment here for their respondents’ judgments? They argue that lifestyle and associational differences that emerged in the interviews show that the traditional middle-class/working-class distinction is more fundamental than any income distinction. For instance, among families at the same “comfortable” income level, they noted important differences in consumption patterns. Their middle-class families at this level were likely to spend more on living room and dining room furniture and less on the TVs and appliances that were attractive to working-class families with similar incomes. The working-class families owned larger and more expensive automobiles and more trucks, campers, and vans. Moreover, income equality in middle America does not appear to produce social equality: Patterns of friendship, organizational membership, and neighborhood location parallel the differences in consumption patterns (pp. 182–183). Some respondents implicitly recognized these differences. A “comfortable” working-class man observed,

I'm working class because that's my business; I work with my hands. I make good money, so I am higher in the laboring force than many people I know. But birds of a feather flock together. My friends are all hard-working people. . . . We would feel out of place with higher-ups. (p. 184)

The wife of a white-collar man was more explicit:

I consider myself middle class. My husband works for a construction company in the office. Many of the construction workers make a lot more than he does. But when we have parties at my husband's company, the ones with less education feel out of place and not at ease with the ones with more education. I think of them as working class. (p. 184)

Coleman and Rainwater were clear that their version of the prestige hierarchy was not a mirror image of the system as understood in the community. There was, they recognized, no popular consensus about the shape of class structure. But they were able to create a composite map of the class structure out of the sometimes inconsistent answers of respondents, each of whom viewed the system from an "inevitably narrow vantage point" (p. 120). Coleman and Rainwater assumed that people were most knowledgeable about the lives of people like themselves, so they gave particular weight to respondents' views concerning the social standing, lifestyles, and associations of those who were near their own level. They listened carefully for repeated references to cleavages in the social hierarchy, which might mark class boundaries.

How do these prestige class models differ from the Gilbert–Kahl national model outlined in Chapter 1? (See Table 2.2.) There are some variations in class labels, but the main differences stem from the underlying bases of the models. Our model is based on purely economic considerations, in particular occupation and sources of income. Coleman and Rainwater, like their mentor

TABLE 2.2 Three Class Models Compared

Gilbert and Kahl (National, Contemporary)		Coleman and Rainwater (Metropolitan, Early 1970s)		Warner (Small City, 1930s)	
Capitalist	1%	Upper-upper	2%	Upper-upper	3%
		Lower-upper		Lower-upper	
Upper-middle	14%	Upper-middle	19%	Upper-middle	10%
Middle	30%	Middle	31%	Lower-middle	28%
Working	25%	Working	35%	Upper-lower	33%
Working poor	15%	Semipoor	13%	Lower-lower	25%
Underclass	15%	The bottom			
Total	100%		100%		100%

Warner, have created a prestige model based on public perceptions of the class order, lifestyles, and patterns of association. For this reason, they make the distinction between old money and new money (in effect splitting our capitalist class) and they lean toward the traditional blue-collar/white-collar distinction to define the middle and working classes. Despite these differences, the three maps of the class system are broadly similar. This may, in some degree, reflect their common debt to the tradition of sociological thinking about class. But the real key to their similarities is that in Kansas City and Boston, as well as Yankee City, prestige is largely, though not quite wholly, derived from economic position.

Prestige of Occupations

Warner, Coleman, and Rainwater, and many other investigators, have stressed the importance of occupation for the prestige evaluations Americans make of one another. Especially in metropolitan settings, where people do not have a detailed knowledge of one another's income, family background, lifestyle, associations, and so forth, they are forced to fall back on a few shorthand indicators of personal prestige, such as occupation. They know, of course, that occupation is a fair indicator of two other sources of prestige: income and education. Physicians are typically affluent. Not many janitors hold college degrees. People may also associate particular lifestyles and patterns of interaction with specific occupations or, more generally, with the distinction between blue-collar and white-collar workers. These expectations account for the emphasis they place on occupation in making prestige assessments. For the sociologist engaged in a large-scale research operation, occupation is especially useful: It is more visible than income, and it can be studied with census data as well as social surveys and qualitative field studies. Furthermore, because census data are available for earlier periods, we can use occupation as an indicator in historical research.

There have been numerous studies of **occupational prestige**, going back almost 100 years, but the best known are the national polls conducted under the auspices of the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago since 1947.

Table 2.3 presents a sampling of occupational prestige scores from the NORC's biennial General Social Survey. Respondents were asked to rate the "social standing" of each occupation. The scores were created by averaging their responses. Theoretically, the scale runs from 0 to 100, but in practice, scores seldom go above 80 or below 20. The results toward the top and bottom are consistent with what we have seen in the Warner Yankee City the Coleman and Rainwater metropolitan studies.

The highest-ranking occupations are professional and managerial (physician, lawyer, chief executive, hospital administrator, schoolteacher), ordered by the level of expertise or administrative responsibility entailed. Virtually all assume a BA or better. The lowest ranking occupations are unskilled, manual jobs (garbage collector, janitor). Between these extremes are the less demanding office or sales positions (secretary, insurance agent) and the skilled manual jobs (electrician, plumber). Managerial jobs are spread out in the rankings—from the chief executive (72) to food service manager (39). Note

TABLE 2.3 Prestige Scores for Selected Occupations

Higher Prestige Jobs		Medium Prestige Jobs		Lower Prestige Jobs	
Job	Score	Job	Score	Job	Score
Physician	86	Firefighter	59	Food service manager	39
College professor	74	Aircraft mechanic	56	Barber	36
Chief executive	72	Social worker	54	Assembly-line worker	35
Chemical engineer	71	Electrician	49	House painter	35
Lawyer	69	Secretary	47	Bus driver	35
Hospital administrator	69	Insurance agent	47	Car salesperson	34
Registered nurse	64	Plumber	43	Garbage collector	32
Public schoolteacher	64	Postal clerk	42	Cashier	28
Computer systems manager	60	Carpenter	42	Janitor	24

Source: Smith and Son 2014: Appendix F; Nakao and Treas 1990; GSS 2000 files.

that there is no clear distinction between white-collar and blue-collar jobs. The electrician and the plumber outrank the postal clerk, and the assembly-line worker just slightly outranks the car salesperson. Obviously, when faced with this sort of task, respondents are interested in something more than just where someone works or the color of a shirt collar.

When interviewees in the first NORC survey were asked the main factor they had weighed in making their ratings, the most frequent replies were pay, service to humanity, education, and social prestige, but none of these criteria was volunteered by more than 18 percent of the sample (NORC 1953:418). Whatever the bases of their judgments, the surveys demonstrate that respondents did have a scale in mind on which they could place occupations with a rough consensus. Although there were significant differences among individuals in their relative ratings of occupations, sociologists were more impressed with the great consistency of the average ratings that were given to occupations by relevant subgroups of the population. The average ratings made by the prosperous and the poor, people in high- and low-prestige occupations, Blacks and whites, men and women, residents of the Northeast and the South, and city and country dwellers were almost exactly the same. Even those who proposed different criteria for judging occupations did not differ in the way they ranked occupations. In other words, differences were largely idiosyncratic, reflecting personal views, rather than systematic variations by class, race, gender, or geography. Nor did ratings vary significantly over time from survey to survey. This consistency across different social groups and over

time suggests that occupational ratings tap some fundamental dimension of social consciousness.

Conclusion: Perception of Rank and Class

From the studies we have reviewed, three conclusions stand out: (1) Americans perceive a prestige hierarchy of both persons and occupations, which they divide into a few categories or classes; (2) there is, however, limited consensus about just how to define and differentiate them; and (3) there is more agreement about rank order than about the criteria used in making ranking decisions, and more agreement about ranking than about division into classes.

Some tentative principles seem to explain the variation we have encountered in perceptions of ranking and grouping:

1. People perceive a rank order.
2. They agree more about the extremes than about the middle of the prestige range.
3. They agree most about the top of the range and make more distinctions about the top than about the bottom. (Perhaps the top is just more conspicuous.)
4. People lump together into large groups those who are furthest from them.
5. People in the middle or at the bottom are more likely to conceive of class differences in financial terms.
6. Those at the top are more conscious of prestige distinctions based on family history (“old money”) and style of life.
7. Social mobility is a source of ambiguity in perceptions of the prestige order. People find it difficult to “place” mobile individuals. Perception of high rates of mobility leads to the conclusion that class boundaries are amorphous or nonexistent.

These principles connecting social facts with the way people perceive those facts are sufficient to explain why there is no straightforward answer to a question that is often asked: How many social classes are there in America? The moment we try to answer the question with data that come from the views of ordinary citizens, we are confronted with ambiguities and contradictions. Coleman and Rainwater manage to stitch together a simplified but coherent schema of prestige classes for Boston and Kansas City out of these inconsistent materials. The alternative taken by the authors of this book and many theorists before them is a model based on economic distinctions. But even an economic model, unless it is very simplistic (for example, classes defined solely by income), runs into inconsistencies. We can expect the analyst to know the relevant facts and make convincing use of them to develop a map of the class system. The map may be more or less effective as a device to interpret social

life. But in the final analysis, the class system is not like the solar system, an objective reality we can hope to discover.

KEY TERMS DEFINED IN THE GLOSSARY

Blue-collar workers

Occupational
prestige

Prestige
White-collar

Do not copy, post, or distribute