

## The Importance of Social Class and Gender in Identity

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Received February 10, 2023; Revised June 29, 2023; Accepted, July 21, 2023

### Abstract

Identity plays a predominant role in today's society. According to the Oxford Dictionary, identity is "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is." Despite its rather simple definition, identity is extremely important in society because it drives political affiliation, school selection, occupational paths, and other important components of life. Social class and gender are two important aspects of identity. An individual's social class is correlated with political views, finances, education, and opinions about minorities and immigrants. Divisions created by gender also influence identity. Historically, women have often been discriminated against because of society's views of gender roles. Although there are multiple examples of women being treated differently than men, this is particularly prevalent in politics. This article examined how social class and gender can have a negative or positive impact on an individual and society in terms of various opportunities ranging from education, finances, and politics. It will be necessary for changes to continue to occur in social class and gender inequalities in order to improve upon an individual's identity, resulting in societal inclusion and evolution. We will discuss ideas to resolve these socioeconomic inequalities and the lack of political opportunities for women.

*Keywords: Identity, Gender, Socioeconomic class, Education, Politics*

### 1. Introduction

Identity is a concept of how people, individually and in a society, define themselves, and how others view them. There are many factors influencing identity, whether it is something as trivial as how we dress, to something as broad and complicated as social class. Throughout the 20th century and early in the 21st century, identity continues to impact individual decisions, influencing cultural outcomes. Social class and gender dictate people's self-identification, political views, and ability to change. Although there are several other important and well-studied factors, particularly race, that play a role relating to identity (Cole & Omari, 2003), this article will focus specifically on social class and gender. The objectives of this article are to highlight and explore identity when relating to social class's impact on education and views on others as well as to examine how gender plays a role in political opportunities, while also offering ideas to resolve this problem. Researching and linking these factors can assist with understanding disparities which could guide positive social change. We hypothesize that decreasing socioeconomic inequalities and increasing political opportunities for women would result in improved identity resulting in the betterment of society.

### 2. Social Class Relates to Identity

Social class has been demonstrated to be highly related to identity. First and foremost, social class is evident in nearly every society. Social class has been a prominent part of everyday life from some of the first societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt through the Roman Era and Dark Ages to our modern world. One historically known factor that impacts social class is income.

Income inequality within different cultures impacts people's perceptions of societal class placement. Specifically, in today's society, there is a significant gap that continues to grow between the lower class and the upper class. In the United Kingdom (UK), the top one-fifth of households have 40% of the national income, while the bottom one-fifth have only 8% (Evans & Mellon, 2016; Social Mobility Commission, 2017). This wage gap is not uncommon. According to Nijman (2020), this disparity is the most extreme in the United States. For example, "in 2016, the top 1% of income earners in New York, took 40% of all income while the bottom half had to make do with 6%," (Nijman 2020).

Interestingly, it is likely that self-perception of social class is not consistent with actual earned income. For example, about 14% of the UK's population is lower class. However, 49-60% of UK citizens define themselves as lower class (Evans & Mellon, 2016). Part of this might be because people don't only determine their social class by income, but by other factors such as education or occupation. This is socioeconomic status (SES). One influencing factor of SES is an individual's level of education.

## 2.1 Social Class and Education

Education level has been demonstrated to play an essential part in social class attainment (Assari, 2018). For example, an interview-based study with American college students found that the wealthier the students were, the more importance they put on that wealth (Manstead, 2018). SES also makes it harder for people-- mostly lower class-- to leave the SES that they were born into. Children from low-SES families enter high school with an average of literacy skills being 5 years behind those of high-income students (Rearson et al., 2013). This is further demonstrated by lower-class students historically having more difficulty getting into and attending college. The cost of college is a burden for many lower SES families, making it sometimes improbable for lower SES individuals to advance in social class. Over the last two decades, college costs have significantly increased and lower-class students may not be able to afford the cost, may not want to incur tremendous debt, or can't move far from home because they have to take care of family members. Some may also have to pay for their own college and they may have jobs that they can't afford to lose if they went to college. Even for those who attend college, SES has been demonstrated to have lower incomes, educational attainment, and graduate school attendance than higher SES students (Walpole, 2003).

It is likely that the school system promotes ideals that middle-class and upper-class children are more familiar with and more likely to benefit from. The design of the American education system structure helps upper and middle-class students outperform their lower-class peers, increasing opportunities later in life. Lower-class children may also be limited in the college that they can attend. Two studies were conducted to show that "highly able students from socially disadvantaged backgrounds are more likely to settle for less prestigious universities" (Manstead, 2018). On top of that, lower-class students generally have more to worry about than upper-class students. Even if a disadvantaged student has high enough grades and test scores to get into a prestigious college, they opt instead to either not go to college, or go to a community college (Marcus & Hacker 2015). This is likely not due to a lack of motivation, but limited opportunities that stem from being in a lower SES.

## 2.2 Social Class and Views on Others

One's own social class has been demonstrated to impact views on other people's financial situations. For example, there is also a rising trend for middle or upper-class citizens to believe that those who live in poverty do so because of laziness instead of social injustice (Clery et al., 2013). This concept extends beyond socioeconomic class. For example, higher socioeconomic classes aren't the only ones who judge those below them. White lower-class people are prejudiced, especially towards ethnic minorities and immigrants.

On the other hand, in multiple studies, it was found that these working and lower-class individuals also have more empathy for others (Piff et al., 2010). This poses an interesting question: Why is it that those in a lower class experience more empathy, but are also possibly intolerant of immigrants who may be coming from the same class as them? Two highly likely reasons for this disconnect are ethnicity and fear.

While social class is a very important part of our identities, ethnicity plays a large role. It is possible that lower-class people may have more empathy, but the empathy is primarily for people from their own ethnicity. Immigrants are more likely to have jobs similar to the lower class, so those lower-class citizens see immigrants as threats who are capable of “stealing” their job (Manstead, 2018). In other words, this bias toward others stems from irrational fears and concerns about other ethnicities. People in all SES ranges exhibit these biased behaviors. However, the behaviors of different SES do vary. It is possible that lower-class individuals blame outside factors for their shortcomings, and subsequently will therefore blame other individuals--such as immigrants--when they are unable to advance their own SES status. Meanwhile, the upper class generally believes that whatever happens to them is not so much outside factors and more their own behaviors and accomplishments. The differences in locus of control and success have been well studied in psychological research (Ladau, 1995).

### **3. Gender Relates to Identity**

Gender has been proven to be highly related to identity. In nearly every society, gender roles have influenced the way women are treated. Historically, women are expected to be nurturers, kind and compassionate. When women act in a more masculine way, it results in increased negative reactions due to stereotypical expectations (Rincker, 2009). This often translates to being involved in caring-type occupational positions, such as homemakers, nurses, teachers, and therapists, which are viewed as more feminine occupations. The lack of women in more “masculine” occupations has been demonstrated consistently in politics, a classically male-dominated field.

#### **3.1 Gender and Political Opportunities**

Women have historically had to work much harder than men to be involved in leadership positions across different levels and different countries in order to have their thoughts heard and taken seriously. Women have had fewer political leadership positions, despite demonstrating success when in those positions. Even in the United States of America, there has never been a woman president, and the first woman vice president was finally elected in 2020. As a result, women often face the dilemma of being “masculinized or marginalized” (Rincker, 2009). This means that female politicians have the challenge of either having to change their views to match with their male counterparts or continue to advocate for what they want to be changed, but in doing so, risk being ignored or dismissed, mainly because of their gender.

Furthermore, male politicians often respond to female politicians by acting more aggressively toward them or giving little to no importance to women’s political accomplishments. This might be because they view women as outsiders. Historically, most governments are classically male dominated. It has been shown that in more right-wing governments, fewer women are in office, there are fewer feminist groups, and women tend to have less power (Rincker & Ortvals, 2007).

Interestingly, it has been proven that governments where women have more power often have more peaceful policies and less civil conflict (Piccone, 2017). This influences foreign policy, and gender equality throughout the country, and lessens violence against women. It was also found that when women have equal rights in politics as men, the government has a positive increase in democracy. Women in government also pay more attention to the stereotypically more “feminine” concerns such as social welfare, legal protection, and transparency in government and business. Men often view these as “soft” issues of security and focus less on them, when, in reality, they are extremely important (Piccone, 2017). This demonstrates the importance of women being involved in political leadership for the consideration and betterment of societal issues.

### **4. Conclusion**

Historically, we are able to pinpoint the major effects that identity has on society. Self-identity leads to actual and perceived opportunities that exist in all parts of life, including educational attainment, occupation, and political aspirations. Although our world is developing and advancing in many ways, several identity-based inequalities still

haunt society. Identity is an important part of who we are and influences a person's opportunities. While there is a potential for positive aspects of one's identity, it can oftentimes lead to disadvantages as well. Identity is a reason why people are treated unequally. Equality in terms of education, socioeconomic status, and acceptance of others as well as increased inclusion of women in politics would not only improve an individual's self-identity but also result in improved societal well-being. While these issues have evolved, there is room for growth that could lead to better health, decreased disparity, and more positive outcomes. Specifically, possible solutions could include increased public funding for lower-income public education to close the gap and decrease socioeconomic disparity through free job training and vocational placement. Furthermore, to increase women's political involvement, the creation of initiatives similar to those which have recently occurred in women's involvement in the Sciences, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) may be effective. Specifically, explicitly focusing and programming throughout school, beginning in elementary school on encouraging and advocating for young girls to be exposed to and learn about political science and government could create a healthy environment in which women would be more involved in politics. This could also result in men being more accustomed to having female counterparts in politics, potentially allowing for more dialogue and less marginalization of women in politics. These possible solutions could ultimately begin to decrease social class and gender disparity by evolving society through increased inclusion where necessary.

### Disclosure

Mr. Conrad Warner is the high school teacher who initially provided an assignment in which the lead author completed the research and initial draft of an article. Mr. Warner provided initial review and guidance for the assignment and initial draft. Mr. Warner was unable to provide guidance after the school year ended. The current article underwent multiple revisions and changes under the research advisor, prior to submission.

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