

Exploring the Relationship Between Social Class and Cultural Orientation in Career Development

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Multiple systemic forces, such as globalization, automation, and the COVID-19 pandemic, have exacerbated societal inequalities. To address this concern, vocational psychologists have emphasized social class as an important contextual factor influencing an individual's access to vocational power; privilege; and resources that shape their perceived worldviews, identities, and job opportunities (Diemer & Ali, 2009; Duffy et al., 2016; Kim & Allan, 2024; Liu, 2013). Social class, denoting an individual's standing in the social and economic hierarchy, not only informs cultural norms but also influences access to resources, power, and privilege (Liu, 2013; Stephens et al., 2014). Consequently, vocational studies have focused on how social class determines access to job-related resources or how social-class-based marginalization, such as classism, worsens career development challenges and work experiences (Allan et al., 2014; Kim & Allan, 2021; Murphy et al., 2023).

Interestingly, Australia has long been associated with the perception of societal egalitarianism, known as "mateship," suggesting equal partners in a classless society (Dyrenfurth, 2007). This unique

historical and cultural background has prevented researchers from considering the social-class variable as a contextual factor in vocational psychology in Australia. However, the majority of Australians indeed identify themselves as belonging to certain social-class categories (Huang, 2023; Sheppard & Biddle, 2015). Despite this, the exact manner in which social class, as a cultural source, informs individuals' career development processes remains unclear.

The American Social Class Culture Cycles model (Stephens et al., 2014) and the Social Cognitive Theory of Social Class model (Kraus et al., 2012) converge in explaining how social class shapes cultural thoughts, values, and behaviors. Specifically, individuals belonging to high-social-class backgrounds are typically exposed to the cultural idea of independence, where they experience limited constraints and are free to pursue their goals and interests. In this context, these individuals make choices to control external constraints by leveraging their capital, power, and status. Consequently, they develop individualistic and self-oriented tendencies, including focusing on their uniqueness, competitiveness, and personal responsibility.

In contrast, people from low-social-class backgrounds are more frequently exposed to chronic limitations in terms of capital, resources, and opportunities. Such adversities limit their choices, forcing them to perceive their world as riskier. Consequently, these individuals tend to seek guidance from their in-group members to respond to risky situations and develop collectivistic and interdependent tendencies, such as prioritizing harmony to adjust to the social hierarchy or relying on others for support to make choices (Stephens et al., 2014). Collectively, such social-class-informed cultural patterns underscore the important role of social class in value-laden career development processes.

Correspondingly, the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016), a vocational theory, incorporates social class as a critical contextual factor in securing decent work opportunities. This theory posits that marginalization and economic constraints stemming from social class affect psychological processes, leading to restricted access to decent work opportunities, which, in turn, hampers both work-related and general-well-being-related outcomes. Within the PWT framework, social class plays multiple roles in career development processes and outcomes, such as distributing various forms of capital and exposing individuals to experiences of classism (Duffy et al., 2016). Drawing from the PWT, a body of research has demonstrated that college students from low-social-class backgrounds are more likely to experience financial constraints hindering their career development, leading to diminished quality work prospects across multiple countries (Kim et al., 2020; Ma et al., 2021). Other studies have also demonstrated that social class is positively related to classism, which predicts poor career

adaptability, work volition, and academic outcomes (Kim & Allan, 2021; Murphy et al., 2023). Despite these important findings, the specific ways in which social class shapes cultural patterns in career development processes remain unidentified. Providing nuanced insights into the culturally informed career choices of socially marginalized college students will advance the quality of social class literature within vocational psychology.

As noted previously, social class plays a critical role in the development of cultural tendencies that inform individualistic and/or collectivistic behaviors and career-decision-making processes. For instance, Australia is perceived to have a predominantly individualistic cultural background. Deery and Walsh (1999) highlighted the scarcity of evidence suggesting a decline in collectivism within Australia. Simultaneously, however, Australia is renowned as one of the most egalitarian countries (Billing et al., 2014), emphasizing the significance of collectivistic cultural values, such as the promotion of harmony. The concept of mateship lies at the core of the Australian ethos. It creates a secure social safety net in workplaces, offering convenient access to healthcare, a higher minimum hourly wage, and leave entitlement (McIlveen et al., 2020). Therefore, within an Australian context, a blend of cultural inclinations appears feasible.

Given the blend of social-class-informed cultural tendencies in Australia, the purpose of this study was to examine unique ways in which social-class backgrounds could inform cultural tendencies and career-decision-making processes. We used latent profile analysis (LPA) with social class index indicators and individualism and collectivism constructs to elucidate the intersection of social class and cultural dimensions. To examine how the resulting

clusters relate to the career development prospects of young university students, we conducted intergroup one-way analysis of variance tests, exploring differences among profiles in terms of career outcome variables (e.g., career value awareness, traditional career approach, and career adaptability). We recruited 419 students from a prominent Australian university with multiple campuses.

Several fitting indices, including Akaike's information criterion, the Bayesian information criterion (BIC), the sample-size adjusted BIC, entropy, and the bootstrapped likelihood ratio test, supported a five-profile model: low social class with low advice-seeking desire, high social class with competitiveness, middle social class with low uniqueness, middle social class with high uniqueness and responsibility, and middle social class with individualism. Specifically, individuals from low-social-class backgrounds did not exhibit a collectivistic cultural orientation. One plausible explanation for this could be that these individuals may be hesitant to seek advice owing to limited social support networks (Sue Love, 2007). Another plausible interpretation is that when students from lower-socioeconomic backgrounds pursue higher education, they tend to prioritize individual advancement over collective group considerations. Their pursuit of upward social mobility through higher education may elevate their sense of personal accountability for their current status, overshadowing their inclination to seek guidance or solidarity from their original socioeconomic cohort.

Another salient observation of our study is the absence of a direct association between social-class profiles and career value awareness or career adaptability. This indicates the potential existence of proximal mediators or moderators between social-

class variables and career-related variables (Autin et al., 2017; Hou & Liu, 2021; Wang et al., 2022). For instance, Wang et al. (2022) revealed that among college students, the relationship between social class and career adaptability is positively mediated by prospective anxiety and negatively mediated by inhibitory anxiety, with these mediating effects being moderated by self-esteem. These findings suggest that belonging to a privileged social class does not necessarily guarantee higher levels of career adaptability. Similarly, through a longitudinal study, Autin et al. (2017) revealed that the relationship between college students' social status and career adaptability is mediated by work volition. Consequently, incorporating mediating and moderating variables when investigating the interplay between social class and career adaptability is essential. Accordingly, future research must adopt a more comprehensive approach, thoroughly examining these mediating and moderating variables to gain deeper insights.

Another intriguing finding is the differential career approach between groups perceiving their social classes as average and privileged. This observation is consistent with the findings of Dalessandro's (2019) research on emerging adults. Here, individuals from privileged-class backgrounds were found to adopt more traditional and concrete career trajectories, in contrast to their counterparts from less-privileged backgrounds. These results suggest that individuals from affluent social strata tend to adhere to traditional career paths, mirroring the historical career trajectories of their parents and emphasizing continuity within the current state and system. In contrast, less affluent groups exhibit a greater inclination toward flexibility in their career pursuits, seeking innovative approaches rather than strictly adhering to conventional pathways. Our study's findings

indicate that the preference for a traditional career approach is more closely linked to one's social class than to the pursuit of cultural values.

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