



What Cross-Class Couples Can Teach All Americans about Constructive Interactions

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The 2016 elections put class back on the map – because, in the wake of Donald Trump’s victory, the media started paying attention to the white working-class. Journalists’ struggles to understand a group that makes up a large portion of Americans highlighted an important fact: most people know very little about people from other social classes – or people from groups living in very different economic circumstances.

This reality has grown acute in recent times. Since the 1980s, U.S. social class inequality has increased as government policies have redistributed income and wealth towards the top, as unions have lost power, and as working-class wages have stagnated. Ripple effects from all these trends gave rise to widespread class segregation, as people of different social classes moved to different neighborhoods, sent their children to different schools, and spent their leisure time in different places. Many Americans now live in spaces where they have few meaningful interactions with people of different classes – a situation that produces many misunderstandings.

In my research, I interviewed American adults who married a person who grew up in a different class. From studying such people, I have learned how to facilitate cross-class interactions – and I have come to realize how much more work is needed on this societal front.

Recognizing Class-Based Strengths

People raised in different social classes sometimes feel that they were raised in separate social worlds – with distinctive norms, expectations, language styles, and dress codes. Yet, the people I spoke with in the course of my research appreciated some of these differences. Specifically, they felt that there were costs associated with the ways they were raised and benefits to the way their partners were raised.

- People raised in the working-class sometimes said that their childhoods were unpredictable – often a consequence of growing up with little money or power and feeling at the whim of social forces beyond their control. They felt drawn to their middle-class partners who experienced the world as more stable and predictable – a disposition cultivated as their partners grew up with the resources to smooth over uncertainties.
- In turn, people raised in the middle-class appreciated their own family’s focus on achievement but felt that it left little space for tight familial bonds. In their working-class partners, they appreciated the closer family relationships based simply on enjoying each other’s company more than on cultivating skills.

In short, many couples saw class differences not as obstacles but as virtues that brought them together.

Constructive Experiences in Cross-Class Relationships

Many of my interviewees described challenges that often confront cross-class couples as they navigate their relationships. Partners born into the middle-class often wanted to take a managerial style in everyday life – by aiming to control, organize, and plan how the couple used resources, spent time, and raised their children. This approach made sense in the class culture they were raised in, where people have resources and power to control their environments.

But the partners born into the working-class often wanted to take a different, more relaxed approach – to go with the flow, live in the moment, and deal with challenges as they arose. This approach made sense, too, given the class circumstances of their upbringings, where adapting to more powerful people and to situations out of their control was often the best way to get by.

Couples that successfully navigated these differences did so in some typical ways. They did not ask their partner to change; nor did they judge them. Rather, they saw their partner as having an equally valid skillset that complemented their own. For instance, a middle-class partner who wanted to plan did not accuse her partner of being unable or unwilling to plan, but instead appreciated that her partner was better at dealing with crises and spontaneous encounters. Similarly, a working-class spouse did not accuse her spouse of being unable to live in the moment, but appreciated that some tasks were better carried out in a planned way. Successful couples could, in this way, allocate tasks and continue to appreciate each other.

Broader Lessons for a Class-Divided Society

People do not need to be in a cross-class marriage to benefit from the lessons they inspire. Everyone is capable of improving the way they interact with and understand people from different social classes.

Teachers, for example, can notice when students from different classes are not getting along and help them recognize that each brings skills to the classroom that others can appreciate. Teachers can also recognize that if some children are less talented at planning or carrying out lengthy projects, the issue may not be laziness but ever-shifting life experiences that have taught such students that planning is futile. Armed with such insights, teachers may be able to help students learn to plan for situations that are more stable. At the same time, teachers can recognize that their middle-class students likely have had less practice dealing with unpredictable changes and may need to learn to react more spontaneously.

Similarly, college admissions officers, graduate school admissions committees, and employers can evaluate their criteria for selecting candidates and ask if they contain unnecessary class biases. Doing this can be in their own interest – because teams, offices, and departments are better off overall when they include some members who can organize and plan and other members who can manage unpredictable events.

Every American, finally, should examine their assumptions about people from other classes. Rather than repeating biased messages parroted from popular culture, people can take lessons and inspirations from successful cross-class couples, who have found that people from different classes likely have contrasting skills and outlooks that can complement one another.

Read more in Jessi Streib *The Power of the Past: Understanding Cross-Class Marriages* (Oxford University Press 2015).