



“Summary of article by Melvin L. Kohn, Atsushi Naoi, Carrie Schoenbach, Carmi Schooler, and Kazimierz M. Slomczynski: Position in the Class Structure and Psychological Functioning in the United States, Japan, and Poland” in Frontier Issues in Economic Thought, Volume 4: The Changing Nature of Work. Island Press: Washington DC, 1998. pp. 382-384

**Social Science Library: Frontier Thinking in Sustainable Development and Human Well-being**

### **“Summary of article by Melvin L. Kohn, Atsushi Naoi, Carrie Schoenbach, Carmi Schooler, and Kazimierz M. Slomczynski: Position in the Class Structure and Psychological Functioning in the United States, Japan, and Poland”**

This article explores the ways in which workers’ positions in the process of production affect psychological functioning, in a Western capitalist country (the U.S.), a non-Western capitalist country (Japan), and a socialist country (Poland). Specifically, it examines the psychological effects of social class, defined in terms of ownership and control of the means of production, and control over the labor power of others. It finds social class to be consistently related to valuing self-direction for one’s children, being intellectually flexible, and being self-directed in one’s orientations to self and society. However, the relationship between social class and a sense of distress (vs. subjective well-being) is weaker and less consistent.

The article asks four questions. First, is it possible to conceptualize and index social class consistently in three such diverse societies? Second, is social class distinguishable from social stratification? Third, does social class have similar psychological consequences in all three countries? And finally, what explains the psychological effects of social class?

### **CONCEPTUALIZING SOCIAL CLASS AND STRATIFICATION**

The study is based on three very similar, detailed surveys of random samples of employed men, conducted in the U.S. in 1964 with a follow-up in 1974, in Poland in 1978, and in Japan in 1979. In each case the respondents’ descriptions of their work situations was used to define their social-class positions, with appropriate national differences in the indices employed.

For the U.S. and Japan, it was appropriate to distinguish employers, the self-employed, managers (employees who have substantial numbers or multiple levels of subordinates), first-line supervisors (who have moderate numbers, or only one level, of subordinates), nonmanual workers, and manual workers. Manual and nonmanual workers are distinguished because the latter generally have much greater control over their own conditions of work. In socialist Poland, in the Communist era, there was no category of employers, but the other distinctions all applied; an additional distinction was made between factory workers and nonproduction manual workers. Factory workers were viewed as central to the centralized organization of the economy, and had greater power and privileges than other manual workers.

Social stratification was measured, in all three societies, by a combination of occupational status, job income, and educational attainment. The correlation of stratification with class is strong, but

far from perfect. In each country, all three components of stratification, as well as the combined index, are substantially correlated with class. Much but far from all of the correlation results from the sharp differences in stratification positions of manual and nonmanual workers; if these two groups are combined into a single category, the correlations between stratification and class are weaker, but still substantial.

Thus the first two questions were answered in the affirmative: broadly comparable indices of social class were developed for all three countries; these indices are highly correlated with, yet distinct from, social stratification.

## **CLASS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTIONING**

The surveys contain extensive psychological data, which have been analyzed by the authors in several other publications. In this paper, they focus on four key aspects of psychological functioning: parental valuation of children's self-direction vs. conformity to external authority; intellectual flexibility; self-direction vs. conformity in one's own orientation to self and society; and a sense of distress vs. well-being. The hypothesis that these factors are related to social class is largely confirmed by the data.

The first three factors are strongly correlated with class, in a manner that is largely consistent for the three countries. In the U.S., managers and employers have the highest scores on parental valuation of children's self-direction and on intellectual flexibility; nonmanual workers are next, followed by first-line supervisors, then the self-employed, and finally manual workers. The ranking is virtually the same for self-directedness of orientation. Rankings in Poland are quite similar to those in the U.S.; the correlation coefficients are even similar in size. Factory and nonfactory manual workers have very similar scores. The correlations of psychological factors with social class are somewhat lower, but still significant, in Japan. The rankings generally parallel those for the U.S.

The correlation of social class with distress is lower, and inconsistent across countries. For the United States, the pattern parallels the other three factors, with employers, managers, and supervisors the least distressed, and manual workers the most distressed. For Japan, an intermediate pattern, with managers and employers among the least distressed, but nonmanual workers by far the most distressed social class. For Poland, the pattern is nearly the opposite: managers are among the most distressed social class, manual workers are among the least distressed.

## **EXPLAINING THE RELATIONSHIPS**

Social class is strongly correlated with social stratification. Therefore, it is necessary to test whether class and stratification have independent psychological effects. The relationship between stratification and the psychological factors remains highly significant even when statistically controlling class. Controlling stratification markedly lowers the effects of class, but of the nine correlations with class (three psychological factors in three countries), seven remain significant.<sup>1</sup> Thus class and stratification have independent effects on psychological functioning.

The authors' preferred hypothesis is that occupational self-direction explains most of the relationship between class and psychological functioning. Their measure of occupational self-direction combines the substantive complexity of work (the extent to which work requires thought and independent judgment), closeness of supervision, and routinization (repetitiveness and predictability of the job). The occupational self-direction index, and all three of its components, are substantially correlated with class in each country; the relationship is especially strong between class and substantive complexity of work.

Statistically controlling for occupational self-direction eliminates most of the correlation between class and the first three psychological factors, in all three countries. This is consistent with the hypothesis that class matters psychologically in large part because people of more advantaged class position have greater opportunity to be self-directed in their work. Once the relationships are controlled for occupational self-direction, there is little if any gain in explanatory power when controls are added for the social and demographic backgrounds of workers, or for social stratification.

## **SOCIAL CLASS AND DISTRESS**

The anomaly is the relationship of social class to distress, which is not cross-nationally consistent. Part of the explanation is that occupational self-direction did not have cross-nationally consistent effects on distress. Another part of the explanation is that other job conditions, such as job risks, uncertainties, and protections, had effects countervailing to those of occupational self-direction, and these job conditions were differently related to social class in capitalist and socialist societies.

## **Notes**

- 
1. The correlations for Japan of class with parental valuation of self-direction, and with self-directedness of orientation, are no longer significant when controlled for social stratification.