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## **The Invisible Perpetrator of Inequality: Modern Conceptualizations of Social Class and Adult Education**

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Keywords: Adult Education, social class, United States, socioeconomic status, cultural historical activity theory

**ABSTRACT:** This paper discusses modern conceptualizations of social class stratification in United States adult education. This paper presents Cultural Historical Activity Theory as an analytical tool to elucidate the increasingly over-stratified and invisible nature of social class in the United States.

### Introduction

This paper discusses the under researched and under theorized issue of social class in United States adult education. The literature in this fields shows that social class (loosely referring to positioning in the social strata of a particular society) is sparsely considered as a primary analytical tool in adult education globally (Nesbit, 2004). Additionally, there is even less scholarly work dedicated to an examination of social class in the United States.

The issue of social class is an appropriate and lens through which to examine the aims of adult education, such as narrowing the gap in learning achievement and credentialing for adults, empowering adult learners, and increasing life chances professionally, financially, and personally (Cunningham, 1993). Cunningham asserts that even though adult education purports to do the preceding, they resound as myths in the field. Cunningham insists on a reexamination of the unmet goals of Adult Education and uncovering the source of stagnancy. This paper expands upon Cunningham's observations and proposes that this examination begin with reassessment of the nearly invisible issue of social class. This paper will explore the issue of social class by first describing popular factors that are widely considered to contribute to class stratification (Hart, 2005; Nesbit; 2004; Mojab, 2004; Burke, 2000; London, 1970). Second, the effects of the hidden structures of social stratification in schooling and working in this country will be addressed (Aronson, 2008; Mortimer, 2008; Malcom, 2004; Scheid, 1993; MacLeod, 1995). Third, this paper will explore how those hidden structures affect adult education as a field and its learners (Aronson, 2008; Malcom, 2004; Nesbit, 2004). Lastly, Cultural Historical Activity Theory will be used as an analytical lens through which to organize the ideas presented by various authors into an applicable process for illuminate social class in the field and dealing with its implications.

### Theoretical Perspective

The general consensus is that the amelioration of social inequality, one of the foundational claims of the field of adult education is not achieved for an alarming number of participants. (Cunningham 1993; Nesbit 2004; Malcom 2004; London 1970). A reprised examination of social class can move scholars and practitioners closer to meeting the desired goals and outcomes of learner-participants in United States adult education. Four of the major

components (education, income, occupation, and wealth) that are documented to inform class as theorized by Scott and Leonhardt (2004) are popular notions that generally form the basis for how social class becomes culturally abstracted. Aronson's (2008) description of the school system's embedding of stratification mechanisms in the fabric of United States' society illuminates how social class has become invisible, yet powerful. This invisible-but-present illusion perfectly illustrates (and has affected) how social class is conceptualized but not widely articulated in United States adult education literature or practice (Nesbit, 2004).

The literature shows that class is not simply ignored. Contrastingly, its complexity makes it difficult to identify and critically assess. Current class notions have moved away from prior notions that only included a binary idea strictly connected to the owners/producers of capital and workers/managers of capital (Nesbit, 2004). These notions of working class led to the formation of an important division of adult education, worker education, aimed at providing for the education needs of workers learning specific industrial skills, but also harnessed social and political power that was organized for the benefit of the workers (Scheid, 1993). Currently, social class is frequently coupled with or subsumed by race, gender, and ethnicity, which render it nearly invisible (Nesbit, 2004; Mojab, 2004), and not as urgent, and frankly difficult to organize. This is true even under the analytical lens of intersectionality, which privileges the examination of varying factors that comprise disadvantaged situations as interconnected and working in tandem (Collins, 2000; McCall, 2005). Even when an attempt is made to connect old notions of social class to new realities, a splintering effect occurs because of the issue of identification. People within a certain group can identify with different socioeconomic statuses even while having seemingly similar group characteristics.

To further understand popular social class ideas, the 'funnell effect' (Aronson, 2008) gives an inventive example of how modern notions of class works. Aronson takes the idea of a funnel with a wide mouth that narrows in shape toward the end, and applies this to the narrowing that occurs as students move through levels of education and social stratifications, which impede their progress. Aronson affirms that students start off with unequal levels of advantage that are exacerbated going into adulthood. For example, it is assumed that children start off with the same resources and expectations, but are funneled into certain careers, colleges, and even into dropping out of school because of the milestones they are able (or not able) to achieve which leads to a funneling or sifting effect.

Expanding upon the idea of a funneling effect can facilitate the new ways of talking about social class in Adult Education that directly apply to our population. Scott and Leonhardt's (2004) application of the 'face cards' of social class, provide an interesting visual for understanding class. In a series titled *Class Matters* (May 2005) *The New York Times* deconstructs the mystifying concept of social class in the United States. In the overview article 'The Shadowy Lines that Still Divide' (Scott & Leonhardt, 2005) there are several components of social class that appear to be constant and critical in giving shape to current ideas of social class in this country. To begin, the authors describe class as '...rank...tribe...culture and taste. It is attitudes and assumptions, a source of identity, a system of exclusion. To some, it is just money. It is an accident of birth that can influence the outcome of a life.' This definition is accurate of the nation's perceptions of class; as residents and citizens we may be able to describe the economic, cultural, familial, and accidental conditions of class, but not capture it. This definition seems to give boundaries to a modern conception of class, but is still not useful as a tool by which to measure or capture class because of its dynamic nature. Scott & Leonhardt go

on to describe four components of class that give more grounding to an argument for the existence of a splintered social class stratification in society. They suggest the following as the foremost factors in assessing class in the United States:

“Everyone is dealt four [suit] cards: education, income, occupation and wealth...Face cards in a few categories may land a player in the upper middle class. At first, a person's class is his parents' class. Later, he may pick up a new hand of his own...” (p 5. )

In the analogy the cards represent each suit (hearts diamonds, clubs, spades) in a card deck. Aces and face cards represent the four highest levels of social class to which one can aspire. The other cards in the respective suits, the number cards, denote lower levels of class rank within the suit. Scott and Leonhardt describe the lives of famous figures who played with the hands they were dealt and achieved a higher social class ranking by picking up higher and shedding lower cards to climb the class ladder. The authors also discuss reaching the highest levels of social class without reaching the highest levels within each of the four component suits. With this idea in mind, readers can begin to understand social class and its function as a constantly changing and redeveloping concept. Even though the idea of the four suits seems satisfactory, Scott and Leonhardt do not capture the changing, living idea of class because they do not account for race, gender, and other mitigating factors.

This idea of numerous stratifications within society is a contemporary idea of social class that is very different from the scholarly work of Karl Marx dealing with class which many consider the foundational work on how class is understood. Marx was premiere in his recognition of the stratification of classes as bound to the economic structure of capitalism (Burke, 2000). The playing card analogy allows analysts to dig deeper into how class has moved away from a Marxist notion of class, containing an infinite number of stratifications.

Scholars illustrate that ideas of class stratification begin very early. From as early as pre-school, separation by level of intellect and ability are systematically implemented and have the potential to dictate how far a child may go in the United States schooling system. Early on, children are taught separations that are evidenced by grade levels, divisions within grade levels (of learning disabled, regular, advanced, and gifted students), and rankings within the classroom. From a young age, ideas about stratification are embedded and refined in the minds of children, educators, and other education stakeholders. Intricate individual stratifications evidenced by report cards, grades, conduct reports, and other assessment systems within the school environment are as apt at identifying a student as their given name. As students grow older these ideas and systems of educational stratification are reinforced repeatedly through at least 12 years of schooling (MacLeod, 1995; Aronson, 2008). This stratification process continues as adults in the workplace, who gain employment based on their education or are taught a skill through a specialized college or school in order to perform specific work tasks (Schied, 1993) When linked with other factors such as race, physical ability, parents' standing in the community and other important factors, the system of stratification learned in the hidden curriculum of the schooling and working settings of American life is easily replicable in every other setting. The composition of neighborhoods and communities complement the schooling and working systems to inform residents' notions of social class, educational achievement, and advancement in society. Because most individuals participate, in some form, in this system of American schooling and/or working, communities, social class is reinforced social class in connection with becoming productive members of society. Notions of stratification for schooling and working extend to every element of the human experience and reinforce social stratifications in relation to means of labor and

socio-economic advancement (Nesbit, 2004).

*Why don't we talk about class?*

If social class is so important and serves perpetuate social inequality, then why aren't we talking about it? The problem seems to be that the hidden reinforcements of social class are not exposed in order to address issues that support social class inequality. Because of social class is everywhere, and can be defined in many ways, class also seems to be nowhere. Rubenson (2004) suggests that class inequalities persist because of a realignment of social organization systems among individuals and groups within society. Individuals and groups no longer align themselves mainly along working class lines as a basis for identification or in a struggle for equality. As the mechanisms of a capitalist society shift the emphasis from the collective power of group solidarity to the need for individual enhancement and empowerment, less static social associations form very loosely along the lines of ethnicity, race, gender religion, as well as, occupation, wealth, and other factors (Rubenson, 2004).

To compliment the views of Aronson, Scott and Leonhardt, Rubenson, Nesbit, and other scholars and researchers who bring to our attention that the matter has slipped from visibility, the analytical tools of Cultural Historical Activity Theory can be used to further illuminate ideas on social class, socio-economic status, and how we begin to approach the issue in U.S. adult education.

*Cultural Historical Activity Theory and Social Class*

Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) (Helsinki, 2004; Engstrom, 1987) is an analytical theory that reaches into the social, traditional, and historical aspects of human interactions to explain human activity. The activity unit of CHAT assists in explaining the rules at play in human situations and community of practice guiding how class is delineated in an increasingly stratified social environment. Essentially applications of CHAT can investigate how humans learn social class behaviors and apply them historically and culturally. If we look at the writings of Aronson, one of the popular features of his work is explaining how the funneling affect produces the consequence of where one lands on the class framework; the longer one is in the funnel the tighter and more difficult it becomes to achieve higher levels of social class. Questions such as, who decides the markers and milestones that create the funneling effect (Rules and Divisions of Labor of CHAT)? With whom are those in the funnel competing with for the same resources and tools (Community of Practice and Mediating Instruments in the CHAT structure)? Contrastinly, in examining Scott & Leonhardt's work, a popular feature use by the researchers attempts to prescribe a set of factors (as with many other popular notions of social class) that explain social class across various different life markers (such as race and gender). The idea of social class is treated as a product and not as a historical and ongoing relationship between various dialectical components and competing environments. These static notions seem to hinder the actual identification of class and modification of its effects. Sawchuck (2003) explains Scholar E.P. Thompsons ideas on class by explaining 'Sociologist who have stopped the time machine...tell us that nowhere at all have they been able to locate a class...they can only find a multitude of people with different income [and] status...' along with other factors that describe a particular person or group at a particular moment in time. One important interrogation of the Scott and Leonhardt model of social class would be, which parts of activity overtime cause these four factors (education, income, occupation, wealth) within activity system (the community

of practice, rules, and divisions of labor in particular) to become popular and solidified? What happens to other impending factors that hinder these four? How are they accounted for? CHAT illustrates that social class is not just a product, but as an organism that fluctuates as the rules and community of practice change within the activity system.

The basic unit of CHAT, the activity system, elucidates class by helping to uncover the structures and processes from the perspective of the subject, the tools used to make class, the community of practice within which class operates, and the divisions of labor that elude to power structures that are inherent in notions of social class. The rules that guide the social class structure and process, and the goals and objectives of social class systems are also important to elucidating modern ideas of class. Because social class happens culturally and historically the current notions are important to consider over periods of time. Taking into consideration the previous two conceptions of class by Aronson and Scott & Leonhardt, historicity and cultural underpinnings dealing with power and perspective seems to be the main factors that are less understood in their theorizations.

### Implications

The field of adult education is underpinned by a social class stratification structure that reproduces structural inequalities. If there are structural issues within the stratification that disrupt scores of adult education participants within society from reaching various levels of achievement, how does adult education address these structural issues? Cultural Historical Activity Theory clarifies formerly invisible gaps that exist between how we understand class, its effects on participants and how we deal with social class in our adult education settings.

Educators and researchers should renew considerations of social class (and its effects) for conceptualizations in scholarly writings in United States adult education from a CHAT perspective. Because of a constant realignment of the meaning of social class in our society, class inequalities persist (Rubenson, 2004) and class has become known as being everywhere, and nowhere, all at once. Researchers can begin to widen the literature space within which social class can be examined by uncovering the elements of CHAT that speak to the dynamic nature of class. To reassess the issue of social class in adult education, scholars should revisit the important works that are heavily saturated with class issues, but do not extensively discuss social class as a framework (See: Merriam, 1977; Merriam, 2007; Cunningham 1996). Applying a CHAT perspective to these foundational works will enhance how we understand current notions of class from a historic perspective.

Facilitators of adult education should examine how social class affects their practices which can help illuminate the issue of social class for learners (Malcom, 2004). Malcom's article "Class in the classroom" addresses how an educator's social status affects their attitudes towards teaching and learning, and illustrates how students absorb these silent messages. From a CHAT perspective, facilitators of adult education can act as mediating instruments as well as rule moderators for current notions of class who help students understand how each element of the system affects their personal, educational and professional outcomes. Educators should also encourage student examinations of how stratifications within society affect their achievements and access to various resources they perceive are needed for life advancement.

As moving, shifting structures of social class stratification continue to reproduce and reinvent the inequalities present in adult education; educators and researchers have a responsibility to reexamine the practices and policies of the field that serve this system of inequality. Cultural

Historical Activity is the initial step to understanding the new portrait of social class in the United States.

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